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A FENG SHUI DETECTIVE NOVEL

# THE FENG SHUI DETECTIVE

Nury Vittachi

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

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To Feng Shui Master  
Lo Hung Lap

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

The feng shui techniques in this book are mostly from the Flying Star School and the Form School of East Asia.

The vaastu principles are from the northern Indian school.

The ancient Chinese philosophy, stories and quotes from Confucius and other sages are largely genuine and come from texts up to 2500 years old. The extracts from 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom' are by C F Wong, with spelling and grammar corrections by J McQuinnie.

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## I Scarlet in a study

*Recently, one thousand years ago, a sage lived on the Plain of Jars. His name was Lu Hsueh-an. He said, 'The trappings of a man's life are not his life. Yet the trappings of a man's life are his life.'*

*Is this a contradiction? Yes but also no. Please consider this image.*

*It is a hot day. You sit under a very small tree. This is good. There is shade. You can see all around you. Nowhere can hide an interloper.*

*But there is shade for one person only. You have no visitors. You become lonely.*

*You move to a bigger tree. It has room for two-three guests to share the shade.*

*This is very nice. But the trunk is a little bit wide. There is a space behind you. You cannot see who is there.*

*Some of us we grow older. We move to much bigger trees.*

*You find a banyan tree so big that a whole village can sit in the shade. You have a very big world now. But there is danger. Behind you there is an unknown space as big as the space in front of you.*

*Some people never get to a large banyan tree. Others move from small to big worlds. But something in their lives shocks them. They go back to very small worlds.*

*Blade of Grass, when you meet someone you must silently ask them a question. How big is your world? This is one of the most important things you can know about a person.*



*There are times when you meet someone and you realise that your own world is not big enough to fit them. Then you have a decision. Do you say there is no room? Or do you move to a bigger tree?*

*Again Lu Hsueh-an said: 'Do not ask the Immortals how big the world is. You make the world.'*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'

by C F Wong, part 73.

C F Wong shut his inky journal and put it and his pen into the drawer. Then he flexed his fingers and stared out of the window. Although he affected the role of the wise old sage when he wrote, there was often a moment when he found himself helplessly transformed into the admonished pupil.

He felt his own world was big, but it was his office that was small. It was the second of these factors that he used to justify his immediate hostility to a request from a person who was above him, in the temporal, corporate sense.

Wong's secretary and office administrator, Winnie Lim, had delivered the bad news in her broad Singapore-Hokkien accent. 'One of Mr Pun's contact, he wan' a favour. M.C. Queeny or something. He wan' you to find a job for his son, you know already, is it?'

'M.C. Queeny? I have never heard of him.'

'M. C. Q. U. I. N. N. I. E. The boy's name is Joe. His daddy is very good client of the company. Friend of Mr Pun. Mr Pun's secretary, she phone me to tell me. You must give the boy a job for his school holiday, okay or not?'

He sighed. Incursions into his private space always caused discomfort. He knew it was extremely common in this city, as probably in most modern places, for persons in power to find jobs for each other's sons. The phrase, he thought, was 'Old Boys' Network', or was it 'Young Boys' Network'? He must look it up in his dictionary of English idioms. But his office was just two rooms, and his organization was small, consisting of himself, Winnie and occasionally an underemployed Chinese philosophy graduate who did part-time research. He had no budget, no spare desk and no inclination to help.

After a lengthy—for her—pause of three seconds, Winnie added her next bit of news: 'Mr Pun tol' me to tell you that he would be extremely pleased

if you help. That's what he said. Extremely pleased.'

This phrase caused a momentary flicker in Wong's eyes. 'Ah. I see.'

There was silence in the room as the brain activity of its two occupants switched to the left cerebrum, financial department.

'How much you think?'

The geomancer pulled thoughtfully at the few straggly hairs on his chin. 'When he says he is "happy", it means a little bonus is in the oven. If he is "extremely pleased", it might mean a pay rise is in the oven.'

'In the oven?'

'English colloquial usage. I heard it from Dilip. It means will soon happen.'

'There is already a pay rise, but not for you-lah, for the office. Retainer is going to be raise' to cover the boy's wages.'

'When?'

'When he comes.'

'No. When is he coming?'

'Nex' week. Monday.'

'Oh. We can just give him some filing to do. Keep the child busy. Out of the street. That's all he wants, really. *Mo baan faat*. What to do?'

The problem soon started to recede in Wong's mind. He slowly let out his breath ch'i-gong style, and his fears were expelled with it. There was something about today that was preventing him getting worked up about anything. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what it might be. He just seemed to be in the grip of a general feeling of wellbeing.

This positive feeling was more likely to come from inside than out, he knew. The offices of C F Wong & Associates were on the second floor of Wai-Wai Mansions, an old Chinese shophouse in a less fashionable quarter of Telok Ayer Street. The small road outside was becoming a busy thoroughfare, and the floor regularly shook as heavy vehicles rumbled past. This morning, traffic had been bad. Slow movement meant there was less rattling of the windows, but more horn-thumping by impatient commuters.

The feeling of calm certainly did not come from the environment of the main room itself, which was crowded with tables, cabinets, shelves and bookcases. It was a disgrace for a feng shui master to work in such a chaotic space, but Wong had long since given up any attempt to control the architectural decisions of Ms Lim. Many powerful business-people in

Singapore would eagerly await his oracle-like pronouncements on how to order their offices, but he dared not proffer similar advice to Winnie. A fiery twenty-six-year old from a Kuching Chinese family, she believed that since she was the office administrator, all physical aspects of the office were hers to administrate. In reality, her principal daytime interest was to practise and refine the techniques of make-up and nail polish application.

Some four years ago, when the company had opened, one part of the single large room they had leased had been blocked off to make a separate room for the chief (and only) geomancer. Wong had initially tried to make it into a ch'ienergy-focusing workroom for himself, but it had proved too small and badly positioned.

In feng shui terms, following the School of the Eight Houses, the office was a Tui Kua dwelling, its back facing west and door facing east. His cubby-hole was between southwest (good—indicating blossoming health) and south (bad—the Location of the Five Ghosts), so he had had a lot of work to do to make it usable. Worse still, it was close to Winnie's desk. The judicious positioning of a metal chime served to ward off the worst of her excess of fire ch'i.

Nevertheless, these days Wong worked in the main office at a desk at right angles to Winnie's and used his room only for meditation, thinking, ancestor worship, auspicious-day rituals and afternoon naps.

No, the feeling of peace definitely came from within, he decided. It came from the good night's sleep he had had. It came from the satisfying oil stick doughnut he had eaten at the breakfast noodle cafe on his way to work. It came from the cheery babbling of the kettle in the corner of the office. It came from the fact that today was his fifty-sixth birthday, although he had never celebrated birthdays, not even as a child. It was a good number, fifty-six, far better than the awful fifty-five, with its strongly negative numerological connotations. No, fifty-six was good, a number denoting age and maturity and statesmanship. A year of wisdom. A time when he surely had something worth saying, and ought to be listened to. He really must get that book of his finished.

With that thought, he pulled his journal out of a drawer and started to write again.



Monday dawned hot and hazy, with the air itself seeming tired and listless. The sun rose slowly and seemed to draw a curtain of opaque mist from the ground. Constellations of dust, lifted by the drifting air, spiralled upwards in the crisp white rays leaning through the windows. The neighbourhood was temporarily woken at seven o'clock by a minor emergency: a small fire in the building opposite, apparently caused by a joss stick falling out of a shrine dedicated to the God of Safety, according to the watchman. Sirens shook the buildings until a fireman arrived to find an elderly Buddhist nun had stamped out the fire with her bare feet—hard calloused hooves which were quite undamaged by the harsh usage.

Wong, who had already been to his first meeting of the day, arrived, sweating, at the door of his office at 9.30, and was greeted by a worried-looking Winnie nodding at a large figure sitting on his desk, reading a foreign magazine.

‘M.C. Queeny. She’s not a boy, you see,’ said Winnie.

‘Yes,’ he said, seeing.

Ms McQuinnie hopped off the desk, strode across the room in two steps and shook his hand firmly. Her name was not Joe, but Joyce, although her family called her Jo or Jojo. She was not interested in filing. She was in her gap year, whatever that was, and was doing a project about oriental geomancy with a private tutor as part of her application to get into an exclusive college. She wanted to spend some of her summer observing Wong and learning about the practice. She wanted to be his ‘shadow’, as she put it. She wanted to watch how he worked in the office and accompany him on field visits. She had been in Singapore three weeks. She emitted a torrent of words, but what language was it in?

‘I’m like, “So how am I going to become an instant feng shooee master, then?” And my dad’s like, “My mate Mr Pun’s got a real feng shooee master and you can work for him for three months.” And I’m like, “Wow.”’

Wong stared.

‘I’ll be like, totally quiet and stuff,’ she added with a laugh. ‘You won’t even know I’m here. Ha ha ha ha ha.’

Wong realised immediately that this person could not be quiet, even if she had her larynx surgically removed. Her look was not quiet. She was big. She wore bright colours. She was a Westerner. It would be as logical for a giraffe to say he is inconspicuous because he has no voice. Some people just don't fit in some places. What was that English phrase in *500 English Idioms Explained* about bulls? She was like a bull in China.

She laughed again, for no particular reason. Wong realised that it was a nervous laugh. They stared at each other for a moment, silenced. This is not going to work, he thought. Still, think of Mr Pun. Must make sure he gets positive feedback. 'So you are interested in becoming a feng shui master yourself?' Wong asked, forcing his cheeks to rise in a smile, and carefully enunciating the Chinese phrase for geomancy in his Guangdong accent as *foong soi*.

She roared with what the geomancer took to be scorn. 'Me? No way! I wanna be rich. Where do I put my stuff?'

Winnie cleared one of the stock tables for Ms McQuinnie to use as a desk. The intruder immediately shoved her desk towards the window with one foot. 'Better view,' she explained, forgetting the insult implicit in her desire to rearrange furniture in a geomancer's premises. After making herself comfortable—with her desk causing an awkward swirl of energy right towards the meditation area—she explained to Wong that she just wanted to write about feng shui from an academic point of view.

'I mean, I dunno if I even believe in the stuff. I'm generally, pretty—you know—skeptical about any sort of like magic or mumbo-jumbo, not that I mean that your work is mumbo-jumbo, no way. But I might try and write it up in a sort of debunking way, because my tutor likes a bit of controversy.'

Wong was not sure what 'mumbo-jumbo' or 'debunking' meant, but he knew that he was not going to be comfortable with this young woman in his office. His observations over the next half hour confirmed this. She was too foreign, too young, too loud, too large and too curious about his work. She kept asking questions. She wrote down everything he said. She listened intently to all his phone conversations. He had to resort to Putonghua, Hakka, Hokkien and Cantonese with callers who shared those languages.

She then went out to a shop and returned with a big cardboard bucket of something she called Tall Skinny Latte, which smelt of bitter coffee and cow milk, and made him feel so sick that he was unable to finish the stewed

colon he had picked up from a hawker for his lunch. She laughed like a braying donkey on the telephone to her friends, the way only men should laugh. Her squeals were so loud they could be heard by his friends on his phone, and he feared they would think he had moved his office to a slaughterhouse.

He examined her out of the corner of his eye as he prepared his reports that afternoon. Ms Joyce McQuinnie was somewhere between fourteen and thirty (Wong had always found it difficult to tell the age of Westerners), and she was highly social, spending a lot of time on the phone organising a get-together to celebrate her new 'job'. She had been an inch or two taller than he when she had arrived in the office, but shrank to his size when she settled in, having removed her shoes. She had very pale skin with a light covering of freckles, and shaggy hair that was a slightly reddish shade of brown, like a squirrel-fur coat. She wore men's work boots with thick rubber soles, above which he noticed dark tights, a short skirt and a large, shapeless sweater. She seemed to have five metal studs in one ear, and seven in the other. She wore no rings, but had giant Indian bangles on both wrists, which jangled as she moved, and threatened to tip her coffee over.

'Is she pretty?' asked a friend of his, on the phone from Kuala Lumpur.

'She's a *mat salleh*,' Wong whispered.

But she made some effort to demonstrate an interest in her subject. The young woman spent the morning looking through books on feng shui, and the afternoon attempting to get to grips with the filing system—no easy task, since Winnie made it up as she went along, the main reason why she could not be replaced.

Wong just sighed and tried to focus on his work. *Mo baan faat*. What to do?

But as the afternoon wore on, the geomancer found himself starting to listen with interest to her phone conversations. He suddenly realised that his irritating new assistant might have a use after all. She was a free source of English conversation lessons, which were outrageously highly priced in Singapore.

Wong had started to operate in English late in life, having lived most of his life in Guangdong, moving to Hong Kong ten years ago, and five years later being transferred to Singapore. He prided himself on his ability with languages (he could speak six Chinese dialects). Yet he had long struggled

with English idioms which he nearly always found baffling and totally lacking in logic. Ms McQuinnie, perhaps because of her age, used a great many English slang expressions. He recognised several from the book he had been studying the week before: *How's Tricks? Colloquial English II*. He was adamant that the next book he wrote would be in English (he had already written two feng shui books in Chinese) but felt his grasp of English was not firm enough. He was convinced that a knowledge of modern colloquialisms was the key to being considered a good writer.

He asked her the meaning of several of the strange words she used, and she watched as he wrote them down.

She immediately adopted the role of a harsh teacher, correcting his every utterance. 'It's the only way you'll learn,' she said. His initial irritation started to dissolve when he learned that she generally explained things well, and could possibly enable him to impress his teacher and fellow students at the English Conversation Club.

Once, when she was on the phone to one of her friends, she came out with a string of terms which he did not understand at all. He jotted them down, and resolved to make enquiries later.

She said 'cool' all the time, which he knew. But she also said: 'way', 'good fish', 'yo', 'hunky', 'ratted', 'soupy', 'pass the bucket', 'gloppy', 'wally', 'mega' and 'wowser', none of which were in his textbooks. Her word for 'yes' appeared to be 'whatever'.



He was furtively thumbing through a dictionary to translate something that sounded like 'trip hop seedy' when the phone rang. On the line was Laurence Leong, deputy chief executive of East Trade Industries.

'I'm just sending you a fax,' Leong said. 'The brief, C F, is to give a swift opinion on an estate called Sun House, in a village just outside Melaka. The fax should be just coming through now.' The machine next to Winnie's elbow immediately began to growl.

Wong looked at the thin, curling papers for five minutes before phoning back. 'No, I don't think so. It's a *yin* house. Very big problem. Very

negative. Even if we really clean it up nice. People never forget. Very hard to re-sell. I recommend you not buy.'

Leong energetically attempted to change Wong's mind. First, it had only been used as a mortuary for less than a year; some six to ten months, he said. Second, only two bodies had been dealt with at the building. Less than a month after the present tenants—a mature couple from Kuala Lumpur by the name of Wanedi—had bought the property, they had both fallen ill. 'It was almost as if the building had bad feng shui before the morticians had moved in,' he said.

'Often this is true,' said Wong.

Leong explained that the Wanedis' ill health caused them to close the business—temporarily, they hoped. The local residents were pleased, as they had been uncomfortable with a funeral house so close to their village. The wife, whose money paid for the house and grounds (she had been a medium-sized heiress) had recovered, but her partner had not, and was continuing to be in extremely poor health. In other words, they were distressed sellers—always an attraction to property buyers.

'The husband is at the door of death, in a figural and literal sense,' Wong had commented, delighted at being able to show off wordplay skills in English.

'What? Oh yes, I see, that's right,' said Leong. 'Listen, C F, I'd really like you to fly down and take a look at this. Mr P is really keen. The Wanedis are still really sick and last week made the decision to sell the place and go back to K L. That's when our man in Melaka swooped. Hang on a minute, C F, I've got a call on the other line. Hel—?' A monophonic tone played 'Greensleeves'.

Wong knew the corporation would be more interested in the large plot of land surrounding the property than the house itself. The geomancer also knew that when they were dealing with a place of death, his services, normally seen as an optional extra, suddenly became essential. His mood brightened. He could claim to have a full schedule already booked, and charge a premium for an express reading.

And it might even be fun. Old Malaysian houses were often interesting from a feng shui point of view. It might be a Peranakan townhouse, or a Dutch colonial dwelling. Besides, he had a good friend in the area: Jhoti Sagwala, a former pupil of his who was now a senior police officer



somewhere near Melaka. He thought about phoning to tell him to get the ingredients for banana-coconut curry—a dish for which Sagwala was justly famed.

‘Greensleeves’ stopped abruptly. ‘Wong, you still there?’ Laurence Leong’s voice was excited. ‘The old man’s died: Wanedi, the owner. That was our agent on the other line. The wife has agreed to let the surveyors and you visit the place, although the body may still be there.’

Wong nodded to himself, pleased that the corpse would be in place. Seeing precisely how and where the bodies were kept, and where the old man had died, would help with his reading and cleansing of the place. ‘Okay. I come.’



The following afternoon, C F Wong and Joyce McQuinnie found themselves in a rather run-down taxi, struggling up a hill near Melaka. Joyce had insisted on accompanying him, explaining that her daddy would pay her share. Although only a bridge away from Singapore, Wong felt that they were on a different planet, or at the very least, on the same planet in an earlier century. He looked out of the window and could not help but feel that the dazzling, mirror-glass skyscrapers of Singapore could not be the habitation of the same species which lived in this lush, green-brown land, pock-marked with a small number of charming old houses, a larger number of rather ramshackle huts, and a distressingly great number of small, new, ugly two- and three-storey blocks.

The geomancer gazed at the pestilence of new structures and despaired. Each was an identical rectangle, designed to squeeze into the ‘perch’ of the owner, and erected at high speed with no thought to feng shui or aesthetics. There was much pride in the speed of Malaysia’s development, but he was worried that some intangible spirituality was being lost forever.

‘Like, so many new buildings going up everywhere,’ remarked Joyce. ‘There should be loadsa jobs for local feng shui men.’

‘Very sad, these are beyond hope, I think,’ replied the geomancer.

They had some difficulty locating Sun House, and their spirits were not helped by the building’s namesake being too much in evidence.

‘Phew, what a scorcher,’ remembered Wong.

Joyce chuckled.

‘What are you laughing at?’ asked Wong, insulted. ‘It means it is very hot.’

‘Yeah. It does mean that. It’s just—it’s just funny to hear you say it.’ She could not explain why it was funny, and they lapsed into uneasy silence. He noticed her looking sidelong at him over the next few minutes, and he leaned slightly to one side, where he could study her expression in the driver’s mirror. Underneath the girl’s loud, relaxed air of self-confidence, there was an unsureness, a nervousness, a palpable sense of discomfort. He could see it in the way her eyebrows moved together when she spoke to him; she seemed to be straining to communicate. Her movements were slightly awkward, as if all her limbs were 2 or 3 centimetres longer than she expected them to be. He decided that she was younger than Winnie Lim, despite being taller.

As they topped the hill, a Chinese-tiled roof showed through the trees a kilometre down the road, the driver gave a yelp of triumph, and Wong knew they had arrived. As they approached, he saw stone walls surrounding the grounds, and realised Sun House was a relatively imposing residence. They turned in to gates which had been propped open, and pulled up outside a low but stately house, elderly rather than historic. It showed signs of having been recently spruced up, with several of the window frames looking new. He sighed. He could not help but feel sorry that his employer, as so often happens in the business world, was taking advantage of someone else’s misfortune. It must have cost money to convert this building (formerly a run-down farm) into a mortuary, and there was a poignant irony in the way that one of the very few bodies that the house had seen was its owner’s.

He ran his trained eyes over the facade. From the outside, the house was clearly built on the European model, although it had several features from the Peranakan terrace style. There were louvred window shutters, a design innovation originally introduced by the Portuguese, but adopted by the older generation of local builders. The house had *pintu pagar*, traditional Malaysian half-sized saloon gates, in front of wooden double-doors inscribed with Chinese couplets. It had a raised front porch that ran the length of the building, wood-clad sides, and a steeply sloping roof in dark red tiles. The upper windows, which were sharply arched, poked through

this roof, slicing the ch'i. The curtains in all windows were shut. It appeared that no gardener was employed, as leaves littered the steps and the porch. However, there was a youngish man in work clothes visible near a shed on one side. He watched the arrivals with a blank expression, neither hostile nor welcoming, and then turned to enter the shed.

As Wong gazed at the house, the front door swung open and he became aware of a figure in the shadows. Mrs Elmeta Wanedi was a small, thin, fussy woman with a mass of untidy hair barely visible under a hood which formed a sort of nunlike mourning garb. Although he had been told she was a Roman Catholic, she looked more like her Muslim sisters, in her ground-length black mourning robes.

There was a certain fidgettiness about the way she stood, and this effect was redoubled when she spoke: '*Selamat tengah hari*. Are you the East Trade people? Feng shui people? Come around the front here. No, let's go through the back first—no, which do you want to see first?' She spoke in a cultured, contralto voice, with an accent which was a mix of Malaysian and something else—Sri Lankan, perhaps? For the letters V and W she used a single sound somewhere between the two, giving the listener the impression that she used the wrong one in each instance. The words tumbled out so fast that Wong found her hard to understand. 'What do you want to see? The section where the—the—the work is done, or the main body of the house?'

Wong was slightly thrown. 'Er, I first want floor plan and deeds.'

Joyce stepped forwards. 'Please accept our condolences on the loss of your husband. We're like, really sorry and stuff.'

'Oh, oh, don't worry about that,' she said. 'The sooner you people do your checking and sign for the house so that we can get away, the better. The surveyors have been and gone. They told me you would take a day or so. Did I say "we"? Oh, I keep doing that. I can't get used to "I", oh dear.'

The widow shook her head and looked down, momentarily at a loss. Then she raised her eyes and smiled. '*Saya minta ma'af*, I'm sorry, I am not behaving with the common courtesy here. I understand that you must have had a *wery* long journey, coming from Singapore. Please come in and have a cup of *teh* or *kopi* first, Ms . . . ?'

'My name's Jo. This is Mr C F Wong. He's like the real geomancer. I'm like, just his assistant, helping out, you know? Cool house.'

‘Joseph and Mr Wong.’ Without a further word she marched to the front of the house. Wong paused to tell the driver to take a few hours off but keep close to his phone.

Inside the gloomy, dusty house, the woman, who seemed to be about fifty, began to relax. At first Wong thought she must enjoy entertaining, because she energetically busied herself getting tea and teacups, quickly overcoming the lack of focus which had been so evident outside.

But she knocked over the teacups and splashed tea everywhere. She explained that she used to have a woman who doubled as cook and maid, but had dismissed her two days ago, on the morning that her husband had died. ‘It seemed ridiculous to have a cook when I didn’t feel like eating anything, ever again,’ she said. ‘And I needed quiet in this house. Ms Tong—that was her name—was a noisy soul, always banging away wit’ the pots and pans, you know?’

‘You have a servant outside?’ Wong asked.

‘What? Oh, that boy in the shed? That’s Ahmed Gangan. He’s from next door, a few miles. There’s a farm down the road and the Gangans asked if they could borrow the old trailer—what he meant was could they have it, now that the man of the house was . . . Of course, I told them to take it away and keep it.’

She made an extraordinarily bad cup of tea—amazingly, it tasted of wet goat—and then sat down opposite Wong, throwing herself back into an armchair in an inelegant way, almost as if she had been pushed.

Then she suddenly sat up. ‘Forgive me for my manner,’ she said. ‘But I am not myself these days. Hen—Hen—Henry and I did everything together and it is so hard to start again, when you have no one to help you.’ The utterance of her husband’s name had immediately caused her face to crumple and her voice to crack. She rubbed her eyes with a handkerchief and began to cry.

Joyce immediately went over and sat next to her, taking one of her hands and squeezing it. ‘Aww, don’t cry. It’s an awful thing to lose somebody. My mum left my sister and me when I was nine and I still cry for her. Losing a husband must be like, even worse.’

Mrs Wanedi nodded tearfully, but said nothing. She gripped Joyce’s hand tightly and then leaned over and put her sobbing head on the young

woman's shoulder. Wong watched with interest, noting with amazement how quickly women can conjure up intimate relationships.

'This must be an awful time for you,' said Joyce. 'I'm sorry we have to like, intrude and all that. Do you have any family members here . . . ?'

'No, no, no,' said the woman, suddenly ceasing to weep with a long, wet sniff. 'I'm fine. I wept for two days solid and finish this morning. I couldn't believe how much I could weep. I have eight blouses, all sodden wet with tears. Mr Wong, you would not believe how many tears there are in a wife's body—are you married, Mr Wong?'

'Not married.'

'Well, your *ibu*'s body, in that case. But this morning I woke up and I said, to myself, El—El—Elmeta, old woman, you have wept quite enough. Get up and do what you need to do. Sell up this old house and go back to the old *kampong*. And you, Mr—Mr—Mr—are part of what needs to be done, so your presence here is good. And you, dear, thank you for being so kind. I'm sorry about your *ibu*.' Mrs Wanedi squeezed Joyce's hand.

'We'll just be as quick as we can and then scram like sharpish,' the young woman said, with a reassuring smile.

'Yes, let us begin,' Wong said, gratefully putting down his still-full teacup. 'Do you have any papers on the house which we can see? Floor plans, ground plans, deeds and other things? Anything like that? I want to know the date it was built, so I can make a *lo shu* chart.'

The old woman retrieved a fat file and left the visitors looking at the papers in a stuffy, odorous drawing room. She told them to take as long as they needed, and to feel free to wander around the house to take measurements or photographs.

'We don't wanna disturb you,' said Joyce.

'You won't. I'll be in the front bedroom, packing suitcases.'

'Do you want me to help?'

'Thank you, dear, but no need. My niece is coming tomorrow to help me move the bags and boxes, and, and someone will take Henry away. I'll be fine.'

She left the room with a curious noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

Wong looked at Joyce in a new light. She had been good, talking so nice-nice to the old lady, holding her hand and all that. Sort of thing he couldn't

do. Perhaps she could be useful in certain circumstances, as a sort of public-relations girl. He wondered whether he could send her out onto the streets of Singapore in a sandwich board or something to drum up business. She was certainly more polite than Ms Lim.



He turned to the plans and perused them with pleasure. The house, actually, was beautiful. It was a real find, with large rooms, big windows, and a natural flow of energy. It was a Hum Kua House, with its back to the east and full of water energy. The presence of so much wood ch'i in the walls of the building kept the water ch'i beautifully supported. The main problem was that its major living area, a large, open-plan room, was in the northwest, the direction of the six shars, leading to loss and delinquency, if the negative influences were not properly countermanded.

After drawing up a *lo shu* diagram following the Flying Star method, he found that the house was entering a positive phase, with a pair of sevens at the entrance. It was thus quite possible that it could be turned into a residence with highly positive feng shui, as long as its brief period as a *yin* house could be dealt with.

The plans showed it to be an unusually old structure, built internally in the Dutch style, with an open air-well section designed in the middle of the living area. This had since been roofed over, but something could be done with it, he was sure. The Dutch had always been his favourite of the European house builders. He believed there was such a thing as natural, instinctive feng shui, a basic, low-level skill which needs little teaching or training, and he thought several of the Dutch designers of the past centuries had it.

Nevertheless, he knew that the building's age and design made it unlikely that East Trade would save it. Far more likely would be a quick razing, and then the erection of a block of flats on the spot. In this sort of situation, it was hard for Wong to decide what to do. Should he do a detailed analysis of all the rooms of the house, in the hopes that his report might inspire one of his corporate overlords to use the premises as they were? Or should he simply do his work more like a spiritual exorcist, help the company to get

rid of any dark forces here, so that nothing negative would remain if the grounds were cleared and a new, inevitably uglier structure went up in the space?

There was no time to ponder such issues, and the presence of his impatient young assistant drove him to set to work, to do a reading of the house and grounds. The next few hours were spent drawing charts, taking compass readings, notes, measurements and photographs, watching the sun, studying the shadows, calculating the squares, and moving slowly from room to room.

Wong was not sure whether the householders had always been eccentric or whether the events of the recent past had unhinged Mrs Wanedi, because there were many signs of clutter and ill-organisation. In the corridor, he stepped on a sharp pin which painfully pierced the slippers he always carried to walk around other people's homes. It turned out to be an earring. In the kitchen they found everything in disarray, with perishable food on the table and tinned meats in the cool box. The kettle which had produced their undrinkable tea was still boiling away in one corner, almost dry.

In the back bedroom, they found a used condom behind some furniture. The second door of this room led to a corridor which communicated directly with the passage leading to the kitchen. The finding suggested a reason why Ms Tong the cook might have been so noisy. 'She was banging away with more than pots and pans,' quipped Joyce, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the condom. Next to the kitchen the washroom was in an untidy state, with cosmetics and damp towels on the floor. 'A guy's been in here,' said Joyce, lowering the toilet seat, and Wong had to agree. Clearly a male in the area—a servant or a neighbour—had recently visited the house. That Mr Gangan, perhaps?

In a room with a floral curtain, they found a pretty four-poster bed. 'This is nice,' said Joyce and then noticed that Wong was grimacing.

'What's wrong?'

'This is where Henry Wanedi was, and where he died,' the geomancer said. 'The southwest corner of a Hum Kua House is the location of the force of death. Often you have bad health if you sleep in such a spot. And look, look here.' He pointed to a jutting edge made by an extension that had been built on to the west of the house. 'It points straight to the bed. Makes cutting ch'i right on the person in the bed. Very bad.'

‘Like, this would have made him ill?’

‘It would have made it hard to get better. And the ceiling. It slopes down here. Squashes the ch’i. Squash-squash. Very bad.’

Even without a technical knowledge of feng shui, Joyce evidently found the house oppressive, because she soon tired of her tour and went out for a breath of air in the garden.



It was late in the afternoon when Wong stepped into a room on the west of the house and found himself in a study which appeared to have been converted into a laboratory. The walls were scarlet. Bottles of chemicals filled shelves, and there were tins of powders and other technical equipment that he did not recognise. There were some large boxes on one side of the room, and some trestle tables in the centre. He assumed that this was a room where the corpses would be worked on—he never really knew what morticians did to bodies. He supposed they would beautify them, put powder on their faces and dress them, rather as a department store window dresser would clothe a mannequin. The walls were lined with an old-fashioned scarlet flock wallpaper, which introduced fire ch’i into a Li room, causing a disturbing, destructive clash between fire and metal energies.

‘Have you met my husband?’

Wong turned suddenly to see Mrs Wanedi looking at him from a door on the far side of the room. Her silent arrival had taken him by surprise, but he tried to smile and look composed. ‘I hope I do not disturb you,’ he said.

‘Not at all. This is where the dead bodies were handled, so you being a feng shui man, it stands to reason that this is the room which you will have to check out most carefully. It used to be the study. Have you met my husband?’

She was looking at a large box on one side of the room and he noticed that it was open-topped. He peered in to see a dead body in the shadows. It gave him an involuntary shiver, which he hoped did not show. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I did not know this was the room in which the dearly departed is staying.’



‘Oh, I should have put him in the living room for a proper wake, if we knew anyone here, but we don’t. All our people are dead or emigrated, except for my niece from overseas. There wasn’t any point in laying him out for wiewing. After all, who is there to wiew him? So my own dear Henry is here, where I can work on him.’

He was listening for a hint of madness in her voice, but found none. She spoke calmly, and with a clearly detectable vein of affection.

‘Henry loved his work, and although we did not do much business here, he enjoyed setting up this room. We did a couple of funerals for people nearby, before he became ill. It seems fitting that Henry himself should be dealt with in the facilities he set up.’

‘Are you going to, er . . . ?’

‘Am I handling it myself? Yes of course. I was always his assistant. We had a young man working for us when we first came. Sam Ram something, we brought him from K L, like Ms Tong. But when it became clear that business was going to be slow, he left to do something more exciting or interesting. I assume he went to Singapore. But Henry said that I could be the assistant. I’ve been his unofficial assistant many, many times.’

She moved over to the box and gazed down with loving eyes at the shadowy corpse inside. ‘I wouldn’t let anyone else do you, darling Henry,’ she said.

Wong felt he should have guessed that the corpse was in the room: it was air-conditioned to a temperature noticeably colder than any other room in the house. ‘I will go?’ Wong asked, and started to move towards the door.

‘No. You don’t have to go. Let me ask you a favour. *Saya hendak ke . . .* I need to go down to the shop to get some things, and I am scared of driving. Can you lend me your driver?’

‘Yes, of course. It is time we go too. Joyce and me will take you where you want to go. I just call my driver. We come back tomorrow, is it okay?’

‘Yes, of course. Come any time after eight. My niece will be here to take me away at lunch time. And she’s arranged for someone to take my dear Henry. I hope you can be finished by then. If not, I am leaving the keys with the property agent. The removal wan will come for the furniture probably the next day.’

‘Yes, madam,’ said Wong.



A twilight breeze caused the palm trees to wave slowly at the car, as the geomancer, his assistant and their new friend rolled down the peaceful country roads, past small houses with yellow-lit windows, each containing a little scene of a family eating its evening rice. The night was cool, and Wong kept his window rolled down. The two women sat in the back, chatting quietly, while the geomancer studied *lo shu* diagrams on the house's birth in the front passenger seat. But he found it difficult to focus in the gathering darkness, and slipped his papers into his bag.

Dusk in the Malaysian countryside is always enchanting. Wong had always felt the country to be vastly underappreciated in terms of its physical beauty. In many ways, its vistas were as striking as those of Thailand or Indonesia, and its general efficiency level, he felt, was considerably higher than those two countries. Night fell quickly, as if a giant hand was turning a dimmer switch. Invisible cicadas raised a sound like static, and a night-caller in a forest nearby could be heard making its characteristic *toooo-toooo-toooo* cry. There was a smell of frying in the air.

Mrs Wanedi talked a little, and then fell silent, and then got out her handkerchief and wept, and then started prattling again. It became clear that what she wanted was food. After two days with nothing to eat, she needed nourishment, but could not face tackling Ms Tong's abandoned oven to cook anything.

Wong immediately offered to buy her a meal at any eating house in the area.

'There's only one,' she said in eager reply. 'Henry and I went a couple of times when we were first looking at this place, a long time ago, but we never got into the habit of socialising here. We thought we would fix up Sun House, get the business going, and then there would be plenty of time to get to know the neighbours. Henry was a friendly man. He would be sad to know that he would . . . before he would get a chance . . .'

She buried her head in her wet handkerchief and started sobbing again, and then, with a watery sniff, jerked upright and took hold of herself. 'I'm sorry. I'm all right, really. It's just that . . . Well, this whole episode here has been strange for me. I guess, in a way, I am glad we weren't very sociable

to the neighbours. It meant that I could have him all to myself for these final months.'

In a neighbouring village, they found Chin's Chicken Kitchen, a small tongue-twister of a restaurant with round tables and uncomfortable stools. It was busy, but a table was found for the party towards the back. Chin's was a noisy place where diners gorged on *kari ayam goreng* and mosquitoes gorged on diners. Mrs Wanedi tried to keep in control of herself, but found it difficult. She ate a large amount of plain noodles, but could not touch any of the main dishes she had asked for. Her earring fell off her left lobe and landed in her soy sauce dish. She kicked off her shoes under the table and then couldn't find them. Joyce had to get on her hands and knees to retrieve them.

'Excuse, I must make a little visit to the *ketandas*,' Mrs Wanedi sniffed, and left the table. A few moments later, she was back, having lost her way, and then started to move in the opposite direction. Joyce leapt up and did her gallant young person bit, taking her arm and guiding her to the ladies' room.

The young woman returned with a grim expression. 'I wonder if, like ...'

'Yes?' enquired Wong.

Joyce looked at him with sadness in her eyes. 'She says she's fine. But I think she is in a bad way. Like, totally. She was leaning so hard on me I was practically carrying her. You don't think she would like, top herself? I mean, is it all right for her to be alone in that house?'

Wong nodded. 'I agree. She is a strange mix of the strong and the weak,' he said.

After a quiet, low-key meal, the driver dropped Mrs Wanedi off at her lonely dark house—and that corpse in a box—while Wong and his assistant headed back to their hotel on a coastal road in Melaka.

'I think it's a horrible house and I think that Mrs Wanedi is mad. If she wasn't mad before, I think she definitely would be after living there. *Brrr*,' Joyce said, giving a shiver of horror. 'I mean, I don't mean to be like cruel and stuff. She may have just been driven crazy by losing her husband. I mean, it must be so awful to have nobody to talk to. How long were they married?'

‘I think twenty years. Perhaps she does not want to talk to anyone. She had Ms Tong to talk to, remember? She got rid of her. And that neighbour is there. Gangan.’

‘Wonder why she got rid of the cook? You’d think she’d be dying for some company, you know. And that young guy, he looks as weird as . . . I dunno.’

They arrived at the hotel at 9 p.m. and stopped in the coffee shop for a nightcap. The geomancer had a cup of green tea. His assistant had a mochaccino, which turned out to be a dangerously over-filled cup of what Wong was convinced was shaving cream.

The hotel was quiet. ‘You don’t like me, do you, Mr Wong?’ Joyce said suddenly.

Wong did not know what to say. ‘No, no. Not so.’

‘Be honest. I get up your nose.’

‘No, you don’t get up me at all. But we are quite different. It is not too easy to . . . talk. I think maybe you are a bit *yang*.’

‘I’m seventeen. That’s not young.’

‘Not young, *yang*.’

‘Oh, I see. Yeah. I guess I am a bit *yang*. I reckon Asian men often find Western women a bit *yang*, but I have a *yin* side as well. But never mind, I’ll try and be less *yang*, if it helps.’

She took a long slurp of her drink and expertly licked the foam off her upper lip. ‘You know, my dad was like, “Mr Wong’s gotta vacancy for an assistant this summer,” and I was like, “Great.” But it wasn’t true, was it? You didn’t really want anyone, did you? I can disappear, you know. Just say so. There are other ways I can spend my time. I could just do the research in libraries, or I could apply to some other feng shui masters. There are lots in Singapore these days, and they even have them in New York and London now.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Wong. ‘It is my pleasure to have you accompanying me this summer, Ms McQuinnie. Please stay.’

‘Do you really mean that?’ She looked him squarely in the eye. ‘I’d rather stay, to be honest, C F, I mean, Mr Wong.’

‘You can call me C F.’

‘Thank you, C F. And you can call me J-M-small-C-big-Q.’

‘J . . . M . . . ?’

‘I’m joking. Call me Jo.’

They chatted for a while, and he was guiltily pleased to hear her poke fun at her father’s friend Mr Pun, although he was careful not to add any negative comments himself. You never know what can get back to the boss. How strange people are. He recalled the words of one of the sages of the Blue Mountain: ‘No lake in Heaven is as wide and deep as each man’s lake of dreams.’



The following day dawned warm again. The coolness of the Melaka morning was delicious, but Wong could feel it evaporating minute by minute. By six, he was breakfasting on fresh fruits on the tiny balcony of his room in the hotel. The sunrise was glorious. By seven he had been for his morning walk, and the pavements were becoming hot. He guessed Joyce was not an early riser, so he did not disturb her, but arranged for the driver to pick him up alone. By 8.15, he was grateful to enter the shady rooms of Sun House. On his arrival, he phoned the hotel to wake Joyce, and arranged for her to be in the foyer to be picked up by the driver at 8.45.

At 9 a.m., C F Wong phoned the police. ‘Chief Inspector Jhoti Sagwala? C F Wong here. I’m here in Sun House. Remember I said on the phone? I need you to come over. Quite urgently please.’

‘C F, how are you? So you are finally here. What a delight. When are you coming for a banana curry?’ the languid man replied. Wong could hear he was picking his teeth after his breakfast—probably his second.

‘I am very well, thank you, Jhoti,’ said Wong. ‘And I will certainly arrange to share a meal with you. But we have to get some small business out of the way. Then we can relax and eat rice. I want you to come quickly to Sun House. My driver and my assistant will pick you up. They are on the way to your office now.’

Wong heard the creak of a chair as Jhoti lifted himself out of his characteristic slouch. ‘What’s up? Why the excitement?’

‘It is Mrs Wanedi. She is dead.’

‘What? Mrs Wanedi? Dead you say?’

‘Dead, yes.’

The police officer gave a deep sigh—the unvoiced groan of a man who really does not like excitement of any kind. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Shall I bring an ambulance?’

‘Bring whatever you like. But it is too late to save her now. She has kicked her goose.’



Fifteen minutes later, the car slid to a halt in front of Sun House, sending leaves and gravel flying. Wong met the Chief Inspector, Joyce, and a female police doctor named Poon Bo Seng at the door. Joyce was weeping. ‘It’s awful,’ she said, wiping her red nose. ‘But I knew it would happen. I said last night. Poor woman. We should have stayed or made her come to our hotel or something. Oh, it’s so sad. I’ve never had dinner with a someone who committed . . .’

‘Never mind. Follow me,’ said Wong.

Dr Poon, an obese Chinese-Malay woman with a Foochow accent, marched rapidly alongside him. ‘So what? Suicide or natural? Could have died of grief or something, was it, maybe? Sometimes happens when a woman loses a husband after a long marriage.’

‘I do not know what it was. But it was not grief,’ the geomancer said, leading them down to the back of the house where the mortuary workshop was. ‘You are the doctor. I hope you will tell me soon.’

They marched down the silent dark corridors and entered the mortuary. Chief Inspector Sagwala gasped. ‘What is this?’ he said, looking at Mrs Wanedi, who was standing to attention, uncomfortably handcuffed to one of the timbers in the low ceiling. ‘She is not dead. What are you doing, C F? Have you gone mad?’

Joyce gasped and stared from Wong to Mrs Wanedi and back again.

‘Let me go, this mad man has attacked me,’ the figure shrieked.

Wong stepped quickly across the room and roughly ripped off the furious creature’s dress. It fell to the floor.

‘What’re you—’ said Joyce, her hand over her mouth.

‘Rape!’ screamed Mrs Wanedi. ‘Help me, help me. Don’t look, don’t look.’

The figure twisted until it had turned around, but not before they had seen the outline of male genitalia underneath an unsavoury pair of off-white underpants.

‘She’s a man,’ Sagwala said needlessly.

‘Yes. It is a sample of the male species,’ said Wong. He took the police doctor by the arm and guided her to the box on the far side of the room. She blinked at the corpse in the box, and Sagwala pushed past them to take a look—as did Joyce, more gingerly, afterwards.

‘Ms McQuinnie, Chief Inspector,’ said Wong. ‘Let us leave the room. The doctor will examine the body. She will tell us if this is Mrs Wanedi here in this box.’

He ushered them out of the room, and two minutes later Dr Poon called them back to inform them that the body in the box, despite the close-cropped hair and male clothes, was female. ‘No doubt,’ she said. ‘Is a woman.’

Over a meal of *bak kut teh* at Sun House (fetched from a village hawker by the driver), the feng shui master told Jhoti and Joyce how he came to believe a crime had been perpetrated. ‘This could have been a perfect crime. It was cleverly constructed. Like a well-oiled watch,’ he said.

‘Clock,’ corrected Joyce.

‘Same. Many men murder their wives. This is unfortunate. They murder them because they wish to run off with their secretaries or maids. They wish to take with them the properties of the wife. But murder is a messy business. Guns and knives leave holes and things. And murder will come out. Nowadays, all poisons can be detected. No, the murderer today has to be excessively smart. As smart as houses, as they say in England. He has to make sure that after the murder there must be no investigation into the cause of death.’

He looked around at his fellow diners, who had both stopped eating, spoons halfway to their mouths.

‘The simple way to do that is to be in charge of the body after the murder,’ the geomancer continued. ‘So Henry Wanedi moved to a place where he and his wife were completely not known. He opened a *yin* house. It meant he would get no visitors from people in the village. No one wants to visit a *yin* house household. You know how superstitious people are in Malaysia. So the Wanedis lived completely by themselves.’

‘In his job, as a dead bodies person, he had lots of powders, things, strange *yeuk* to try out on the poor woman. She was an heiress—remember, Leong told us that? She became ill of course, with the bad medicine he gives her. He pretends to be ill also. When he is asked to do any real dead bodies he does them. It is good practice for the murder he is about to do. Finally, he kills her. He swaps clothes with her. He use her big bucks to buy this house. Now it is his. He is now in the funeral business. He can do everything with the body himself. No one will have any chance of finding out his crime. In this case, murder will not come out, so he thinks.’

Sagwala pulled at the tips of his black moustache, like a Victorian villain. ‘Clever, C F, very smart. But what gave her, I mean him, away?’

The geomancer wiped his mouth with a napkin. The hawker food was not bad, but he was eating sparingly, knowing that a banquet would be provided at the Sagwala household that night. ‘There were a number of things. I trod on an earring when I was reading the house. It had a pin and was an earring for ears with holes.’

‘Pierced ears,’ supplied Joyce.

‘Yes. Yet the earring of the Mrs Wanedi we met was not the same. It fell off in the restaurant. Do you remember, Joyce? What sort of earrings slide off your ears? Clip-on earrings. Designed for people who are not having pierced ears. So I thought the earrings in the house did not belong to the person sitting with us in the restaurant. It was easy to take the next two steps to check what I thought. I look at the earlobes of the person who says she is Mrs Wanedi. And I look at the person in the box. The live one has no holes in her ears. The dead one does.

‘She went to the toilet in the restaurant with us. She went the wrong way. She went to the men’s toilet. Then she came back. You showed her where the women’s toilet was. But she said earlier that she and Mr Wanedi had already been to the restaurant. She should know where the ladies’ room was. It was a small but interesting mistake. Once I began to think maybe she was a man I just watch. I see how she moves. How she sits. How she walks. Definitely a man. Also, there was the bathroom in the house itself. No one who had been a woman for fifty years could make such a mess in the bathroom. Even if she had lost her domestic servant. It was a male bathroom, as Joyce said.’



‘Of course. The seat was up—the toilet seat,’ the young woman exclaimed.

‘Yes. Even when he was disguised as a woman, he still did his pee-pee standing up. He forgot to put the seat down afterwards. Some habits you don’t think about. So you cannot fix them. “The trappings of a man’s life are his life,” said the sage Lu. He may try to leave them behind. But they will follow.’

‘And the room with the bad energy . . .’ said Joyce.

‘The cutting ch’i.’

‘Yeah. It was a woman’s room, all flowers and stuff,’ said the young woman. ‘It was the real Mrs Wanedi who had a bad time with the illness, not Henry. Like, wow. He killed her and then switched clothes. That is so totally, utterly evil.’ She leaned back in her chair. ‘She, I mean he, was a good actress. I mean, all that crying and stuff. It isn’t easy to produce real tears when you’re not really sad. I know, I’ve tried a few times.’

‘It is if you have help,’ said Wong. ‘Did you notice she always put the handkerchief to her eyes just before she cried. Not after? A little *laat jeiu jau*— what is it in English?’

‘Fresh chilli oil,’ said Sagwala.

‘Yes, fresh chilli oil in the handkerchief would make your eyes red and crying and make your nose pouring.’

‘Running,’ said Joyce. ‘Your nose runs. Not pours. Well I suppose it could pour . . .’

Sagwala leaned forwards. ‘What a long, slow, cruel, calculated crime, C F. The man must have been really very, very strong-willed to restructure both their lives in this way, over a period of what? A year or so? Purely for the purpose of getting rid of his own beloved wife and stealing her money.’

Wong nodded. ‘Anyone who can have a red-colour study . . . they can do any evil, I think.’

Joyce’s eyes suddenly widened. ‘Yeuccch. Now I know why she, I mean he, kept leaning on me. On my left boob mainly.’

‘There’s one more thing,’ said Wong. ‘Maybe he was not by himself. I don’t know but I think maybe he had what is called a partner in crime. Ms Tong the cook was with them before they came to here. She stayed in the house all the time. She was the only person with them. I think maybe she

plans to meet Henry Wanedi. Maybe she will help him spend the cash from the sale of the house.'

'The niece from overseas,' said Joyce. 'Ms Tong could have been his secret lover, and would return today and tell us she is the niece from overseas.'

'Maybe so. Or maybe some other accomplice,' the geomancer said. 'There is a female involved, I think. She is coming. This is why I say we must stay here and eat. The niece is coming at lunch time today, remember? That's why I ask driver to bring enough food for four, her also.' Wong lowered his spoon and wiped his mouth.

For several minutes, there was no sound except that of Chief Inspector Sagwala tucking his fourth plateful into his cavernous mouth.

Then the doorbell rang. The police officer rose reluctantly to his feet, aware that duty was again calling. 'That'll be her now. You coming with me?'

But C F Wong had slipped away to another table and was busy scribbling in his journal.



## 2 Printing errors

*In the twenty-ninth century BC there was a man named Fu Hsi. He had great skill in designing things. But not palaces. He liked to design gardens and rivers.*

*There was a big flood. The River Lo overflowed. Fu Hsi spent many days walking on the hills around the palace. He drew maps showing where dykes should be built. When the flood came back, the palace was safe. Fu Hsi became very famous.*

*One day, he was sitting on the banks of the River Lo. He started watching the turtles which swam there. His eyes fell on the patterns on the shells of the turtles. One of them had a shell which had a section in the middle at the top and eight sections around it. Fu Hsi noticed something. The dots in the east, middle and west segments added up to fifteen. When he added the marks north, middle and south, they were also fifteen. Southwest, middle and northeast too added up to fifteen. Northwest, middle and southeast were also fifteen in total.*

*This became known as the nine-piece magic square. Blade of Grass, the main thing was that Fu Hsi learned that there could be order in things. Order that you cannot see but is very magical.*

*He had knowledge of architecture and knowledge of hidden magic. Fu Hsi became the founder of feng shui.*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom',

by C F Wong, part 81.

His hand stopped, mid-flourish, and he looked at his watch. Oh, already 9.15. Time to go. He would have to do some more writing later. C F Wong slipped his journal into his desk and slid his chair back, the sudden scraping like a roar in the quiet room where his office administrator was sinking back into sleep. The noise caused Winnie Lim's head to bob up. 'I will come back before lunch. Maybe twelve o'clock,' he told her.

Joyce McQuinnie, who was in the middle of a lengthy, murmured personal call on the phone, told her listener to hang on. She spoke to her boss over her feet, which were on her desk encased in a pair of pointed cowboy boots, purchased, oddly, as a souvenir of Melaka. 'Where're you going? Am I coming?'

'This is your decision. I am going to Hong Siu Publishing Company in Orchard Road.'

'Oh. Was that the assignment you said about last week, and I'm like, "Yawn-yawn, that's as dull as a dead dodo's doodoos"? Like an office in an office block?' She spoke with the voice of a yawn.

'No. No one is dead there. But, yes, it is an office in an office block.' He picked up his bag.

'I think I'll just stay and write up my notes from last week. I've got so much to do today I don't think I can spare like, a minute even.' She put her feet back on the desk and resumed her somnolent conversation, which seemed to consist mainly of making humming noises.

'Okay. Winnie, if there are any important calls, please call me at *Update*. I will definitely be back before one.' The office administrator did not reply, being now engrossed in adding green glitter to the gold paint on her nails.

'*Update*?' This was Joyce, interrupting herself again.

'*Update* is the name of the magazine Hong Siu makes.'

'Becky, gotta go. Catch ya.' Joyce abruptly threw the handset into its cradle, jumped to attention and started sweeping items into her shoulder sack. With a canine yelp of extraordinary volume, she extracted the paper cup of coffee she had swept into the bag, and cleaned out the frothy mess with a paper tissue. 'Yuk. Hang on two ticks. Just getting my bits. I'm coming with you.'



Ten minutes later they were both slumped silently in a taxi, which was locked in a log-jam of cars gently drifting northwards along New Bridge Street. The young woman's interest surprised Wong. The previous Friday he had explained that the present assignment was very much the standard corporate feng shui reader's task: to go to an office where business had been poor, and arrange for changes to ensure better fortune. The building was a relatively new skyscraper in Orchard Road, and the job was scheduled for two mornings. Joyce had said that it sounded dull.

He admitted to himself that it would not be a challenging task. He recalled having done a similar job in the very same building, maybe two years ago. It was an almond-shaped tower on a rectangular podium, and belonged to the Four West Houses, being of the Chien Kua, with its back facing northwest and its element being metal. The office suites within radiated outwards like a wheel, and he was hoping that the one he was about to visit would be northwest or northeast of the centre, the more prosperous directions for such a house. But given the business problems, he knew it was more likely that it would face south or southeast.

Still, there was much that could be done even in the worst cases. He thought with pleasure of instances where he made simple changes to the placement of elements within an office suite and caused a dramatic change in the way the ch'i energy flowed. Once he had dealt with an executive, born under an earth sign, who had encased herself entirely in a wood-panelled office, which of course destroyed her natural soil energy. The geomancer's first move had been to add a red carpet under her chair, to provide a supportive and protective layer of fire ch'i. He then moved her desk to the northwest corner of the room, facing southeast, to build up the woman's ability to command respect. Other changes made outside her office caused the energy to flow smoothly through the premises, pooling slightly around her desk. During a follow-up visit the following week, he found that the general improvement to the office environment would have been detectable by anyone with any sensitivity.

Wong, like many feng shui masters, knew the lore of several of the more serious schools of the arcane art, and had no scruples about mixing elements of the Flying Star method with those of the Eight Directions or Three Yuan method, if the result was a workable solution to a difficult problem.

Yawning in the taxi, Joyce explained her change of heart. He had not previously mentioned that the publishing house was the office of *Update*, a small but lively twice-a-week tabloid newspaper of which her flatmate Emma, a flight attendant with Singapore Airlines, was an enthusiastic reader. *Update* had started as a weekly, two years ago, but now appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays. Joyce, although she had spent less than a month in the city-state, had quickly got into the habit of reading it—particularly enjoying a four-page section called *Yoot* at the back of the magazine, featuring music and celebrities.

She said she was especially keen on one reviewer, who signed himself B K. ‘He reckons the Mooneaters are really cool, while most people are like, ‘Moon-Who?’ B K also loves That Guy’s Belly, have you heard them?’

‘That what?’

‘That Guy’s Belly.’

‘Whose belly?’

‘No, I guess not. But, like, it’s good to see that there’s someone in this part of the world who appreciates music with a bit of like, class, you know? I mean, it’s not all good. There’s this columnist called Phoebe Poon who is just awful, always trying to be clever-clever, you know, whatever, while really she’s just the pits. She really sucks.’

‘Sucks what?’ asked Wong, instantly regretting the question.

‘Not sucks anything. Just sucks.’

‘Oh, I see,’ he lied.

Talking to Joyce was always exhausting. He knew that some adult men were attracted to young women, but had they ever tried talking to them? They were so completely separate a species that he could not see how any form of human relationship could be possible. One could communicate better with a dog.

The geomancer looked out of the window and marvelled for the thousandth time at Singapore’s skyline. He still missed the easy predictability of life in calm, rural Guangdong, but he had to admit, there was something enjoyably energising about this electric city, with its towering glass and steel monoliths, which the tropical morning sun was even now turning into million-watt fluorescent lights. And the people, uniform in their white shirts and black briefcases, appeared to be electrified as well, so busy getting things done that their whole lives disappeared in a

blur of inconsequential activity. So often he found himself trying to fix the office of some harassed executive with his *lo pan*, when he longed to tell the man that the best thing would be to flee the office and spend a month squatting on a rotting jetty in Guangzhou watching slow ferryboats ply the Pearl River.

‘You know people in Singapore. I think the people in *Update* they will be very busy. Perhaps we should not talk to the staff too much. Just do our work quietly.’

‘No prob, gotcha,’ murmured Joyce, who had suddenly become sleepy again.

‘The job, it should not be hard.’

‘Neat.’

‘No, publishing places are often very messy. But I think this will not be difficult. I did a similar office in the same building two years ago. Brighter Corp. The offices, when you move in, are very badly designed for feng shui. But I could see what had to be done. It was easy to redesign the office so that the problem went away completely. Brighter Corp did very well after that, and moved to a much bigger office six months ago. I did that one too.’

He smiled at the memory. There was nothing wrong with boasting a bit if you are an old man just telling the truth to a young person who would benefit from hearing it. For a fleeting second Wong felt correctly positioned in life, as if the spheres and the stars had momentarily swung into the right positions. Little irritations aside, life was good. A friendly sun glinted from the window of the taxi opposite. A DJ’s babble trickled, uncomprehended, into his ears from a panel in the door at his elbow. The driver was nodding at the wheel. A tree waved in the slight breeze. Wong looked at Joyce and found, for the first time, an absence of hostility in his own gaze toward her, although he sensed no warmth in it.

Eight minutes later, the taxi broke free from the slow train of morning traffic on the main road and turned in to the dropping-off point of a grand but rather character-less skyscraper. Wong saw, through the glass doors, the familiar pink-brown floor of polished granite, and dark marble walls, a combination that was now more or less uniform for lobbies of Singapore office blocks.

Heading from the car to the building was like running from a fridge through a sauna to another fridge.

When they were in the fashionably dark mirror-walled lift, the geomancer looked at the address card in his hand, and noticed something which gave him a start. 'Oh. Hong Siu Publishing is on the same floor that Brighter Corp was on. I wonder if—'

But his question went unasked as the elevator arrived on the twelfth floor and the door opened. To the left of the elevator bank, they saw the glass doors of Hong Siu Publishing, and he received his answer. The company to which they were heading was housed in the old offices of Brighter Corp.

Somewhat taken aback, he rang the bell, and a smiling, helmet-haired receptionist buzzed the door open, and led them to the editor-publisher, Alberto Tin, a chubby man of about thirty, who clamped one hand over the mouthpiece of the phone handset to which he was listening, and whispered: 'Wait a minute. I'll come, quick. Sit, sit.'

Joyce retreated to the black leather sofa behind them, but the geomancer remained standing and peered into the main premises to the left of the publisher's office. With difficulty, his sleepy assistant pushed herself off the marshmallow-soft seat and joined him. The space had been divided into a main work room and a series of smaller offices on either side. There were desks piled with paper, each with an individual computer, apparently where the writers and editors worked; another part featured desks in clusters, carrying large monitor screens and surrounded by computer equipment, which presumably housed the design and production staff.

The staff, mainly young people in casual clothes, seemed caught up with what they were doing on their screens, and didn't look up when the newcomers stepped into the room. The air-conditioning was set very high, and strip-lighting gave the room a blue-white glow. The stop-start, clickity-clack of computer keyboards formed a low undercurrent of sound.

Wong glanced at his watch and looked towards the window on the far side, getting a directional bearing by the position of the sun. He then scanned the premises. Alberto Tin's office was in the northwest, the classic position for the head of a company.

The writers appeared to be in the south of the room, an area always associated with reputation, social skill and public profile. Due west was a room containing a bespectacled woman and lots of box files: the company



accountant, more than likely, if they had followed the correct teachings of the compass method.

Surprisingly, even the parts of the feng shui guidelines which were often skipped, such as the right places for transportation and investment, appeared to have been carefully adhered to. East was the advertising director's room—and she, presumably, would have the responsibility of expansion and developing new business, with the help of ch'i from that direction. Next to the reception was an open area containing a pair of young men who were not in suits, and were holding motorcycle helmets: presumably the dispatch riders, properly placed in the southeast, which fosters efficient movement.

Even Joyce noticed that the room had been laid out with respect for the correct principles. 'I'm not an expert,' she said, but they seem to have followed like, a lot of your principles. Look where that tree and that water thing is. Water supports wood, right? It looks as if it has been feng shuied pretty well already.'

'This is the old office of Brighter Corp,' Wong said. 'It has been, ah, feng shuied. By me.'

'Oh. So they made changes which ruined the energy flow in your original plan or something?'

Wong looked around carefully before vouch-safing an answer to that question. He poked his head down a corridor and looked into another area. 'Everything is almost exactly as I had designed it for the other company.'

'Does that mean you got it like . . . wrong?' Joyce gave him a teasing grin.

'No! I was not wrong,' said the geomancer, crossly. 'Just because the physical space is right, does not mean I am wrong, you, you *Form Schooler*.'

'Okay, okay, keep your hair on. You don't have much to waste, after all.' Joyce appeared to be expecting a laugh. When it did not appear, she sank her head into her shoulders, suddenly cowed.

Wong, who had stormed away to look down a corridor, returned and then said more quietly: 'I was not wrong. Maybe the space is arranged in the right way for the flow of energy. But you do not stop there. Not unless you are the youngest amateur in the Form School. There is so much more. What if the birth chart of the company, or the boss, does not fit with the

commencement chart of the office? Or what if the company's move was at the wrong time, and in the wrong direction? What if the company moved on a day of five towards the number five, thus unleashing destructive power? This could cause a bad effect, indeed. Or there could be some change outside. A new building, a new park, a new lake, understand or not?

He strolled over to the window near the production area, and a young man momentarily glanced at them before returning his attention to the screen. The Singapore cityscape was constantly changing, of course, and Wong noticed several new buildings coming up. But there was no obvious bringer of bad fortune in the view.

A voice called from behind them. 'Sorry, sorry for abandoning you. Come, come, come into my office and take a seat.' Alberto Tin summoned them towards his glass tank with flapping palms. 'It is good to see you, thank you for coming. Would you like some tea, coffee, Coke?'

'No, thank you,' said Wong.

Joyce winced, having an insatiable appetite for caffeine.

'Well, would you just like to get started? Is there anything I can do for you? Any questions?'

'Yes. Many.' Wong sat down, took out his pens and notebooks, and asked Tin a lengthy series of questions, eliciting his birth date, birth time, place of birth and other details. He asked for the date the company was founded, the date that business started in this new office, and the date the newspaper was launched. He requested floor plans and all other documents relating to the design of the office, including a map of the computer network. It took nearly twenty minutes to pull together all the information the geomancer asked for, and assemble it in the conference room, which was to be the work room for the pair from C F Wong & Associates.

While Wong started to examine these, Joyce turned to Tin and flashed him a smile. 'Hey, I really like your mag. It's way cool. I read it all the time. My flatmate is a subscriber from way back, like for a year or more.'

'That's very kind of you. Always good to meet our boss. I always tell the staff that the people who buy our publications are our employers and paymasters, so thank you.' The roundness of Tin's face was unfortunately emphasised by his page-boy haircut, circular glasses and wide smile, which turned his cheeks into two smaller circles.

‘I particularly like the *Yoot* section. I gotta ask you. Why is it called that? I mean, who’s *Yoot*? Is that like your nickname or something?’

‘We named it after one particular politician’s pronunciation of the word “youth”, you see.’

‘Oh, right, I see. Yeah, I suppose with a Singapore accent. Cool. In England we say *yoof*. I like your reviewer B K. He likes all the same music I do. I like Dudley Singh’s film reviews, too.’

‘Well, thank you for the compliment. I will tell him. In fact, you have told him. You see, I am B K.’

‘You are? Well, that’s great. Those Mooneaters rock.’

‘They do.’

*‘Trip it, trip it, trip-trip hop.’*

*‘Do me baby, please don’t stop.’*

*‘Shake your booty in my face.’*

*‘Push it mama to the top. Yo!’*

‘That’s such a cool song,’ said Joyce, with a laugh. ‘The lyrics are like, awesome, totally.’

‘Totally,’ agreed Tin.

Wong gave them a sidelong glance. Tin understands her language. So, it must be a sort of code which can be broken by adults. What is the cultural significance of shaking a boot in front of one’s face? He wondered whether there was a phrase book available on teenage argot.

‘Hey, in the mag your name is B K, but your name’s Alberto, right?’ Joyce was excited.

‘My name is Alberto, and B K and Phoebe Poon. There are only five staff on the editorial side of this newspaper. We all do several columns and have several names. This is standard for successful publications in Singapore. Small staff in editorial, big staff in the ad sales department.’

‘Is Dudley Singh real?’

‘Dudley Singh is real and so is Susannah Lo. You Westerners say many hands, light work. We Singaporeans say few hands, many profits.’ He gave a theatrical frown. ‘But sadly not so in this case. Never mind. Your Mr Wong I hope will help in this regard. Oh, do please excuse me. I shall be right back.’ The helmet-haired woman was waving at him through an internal window. He scurried off to take a phone call.

Wong had already sketched out a rough chart and was examining it with puzzlement. This assignment, which he had believed would be the easiest of the month, had turned into a challenge. How could an office he had already done, and counted as a success, have turned into such a financial flop? There must be something dramatically wrong with timing. *Lo shu* charts should provide the answer. But first, he must check the basic shape and direction of the premises.

As he pored over the floor plan, Joyce made an announcement, evidently feeling the need to make amends. 'Hey, here's something I can do for you. You need to find the middle first, right? Difficult because the office is such a weird shape with the curved window and that L-shaped bit that goes towards the lift, right? Well, I can calculate the middle of a complex rhomboid. I learned it in geometry. You gotta calculator?' She held out her hand.

Wong just looked at her.

'Okay, no calculator, huh? Never mind. I can borrow one from B K's secretary.'

'Mr Tin.'

'Yeah.'

She returned two minutes later with a desk calculator from the accountant's room and sat down in Tin's leather seat at the head of the conference table. 'Lemme see. You measure the sides of these bits first, and then . . .' The young woman was relatively silent for the next ten minutes as she sat with her tongue caught between her teeth and covered a sheet of paper with scribbled calculations.

'Bloody difficult, because of this curved bit,' she said. 'Hang on a mo. Hmm. Three point five. Plus a half . . .'

Another five minutes of scribbled calculations flowed. At last, she sat back and surveyed her handiwork with pride. 'I think the middle is sort of here. Or maybe a bit this way. Hey, what are you doing?'

She looked up to see the old geomancer had cut a piece of cardboard into the shape of the floor plan. He held up a pencil and attempted to balance the card on it. After a few attempts, he found the point at which the card stayed balanced on the tip of the pencil lead. 'Here is the middle of the premises,' he said.

Joyce looked deflated. ‘Oh. Right. Yeah, I suppose that’s a quicker way of doing it.’

She compared the middle of the room, according to his pencil-balancing method, with her own result. ‘Well, I was nearly right, sort of, well not too far out, I guess, anyway, I was in the same sort of bit. Think I’ll go and get some Coke from the machine, want some? No? Whatever.’



Wong soon lost himself in his most arcane charts, studying floor plans, consulting almanacs, taking measurements, taking light readings, taking magnetic readings, examining what was outside the windows, going through each room carefully to make sketches. He drew more than a dozen *lo shu* charts.

Tin, in an interlude between his endless phone calls, re-entered the room and carefully explained the activities of the office. ‘The writers, artists and so on are in that space over there, because it is supposedly the most creative. Dudley is the chief there. The pages, once read by the proofreaders, are taken to the Sam Long Output Centre, two floors down, for processing by my deputy, Susannah Lo, who is also production editor. We bring each plate back here when ready to go. The final camera-ready pages are prepared by 1.15 p.m. exactly, the day before distribution, which is when it goes to the printers. Hollis News Retail distributes them, largely through its own outlets. Money from dealers, subscribers and advertisers is all dealt with in that little room there. The previous tenants told us that is supposedly the best place for attracting gold and holding on to it, in feng shui terms.’

‘Your office design is correct,’ said Wong. ‘It fits with what I said on my earlier reading of the room. For the previous tenant. What exactly is the problem, please? Low sales, low readers, low advertisements?’

Alberto Tin gave a deep sigh. It was clear that he was a cheerful man by nature, but he was under heavy pressure. As soon as his smile disappeared, Wong could see the heavy grey bags under his eyes and tension in his mouth.

‘The problem is—well, to be honest, I don’t know what the problem is. The readers love us, the mailbag is bigger than ever, we’ve got better writers, better photographers, better design, our marketing woman has been working flat out. But it’s just not working. People are just not buying the thing. We were doing 26 000 a year ago, which is not bad for a young, small mag in a relatively small market. This year we were hoping to climb steadily. Instead we’re down to about 9000 or 10000. We cannot survive like that. The advertisers are dropping out like the proverbial flies.’

‘Why not do some ads on TV?’ said Joyce. ‘You get neat ads these days.’

‘We’ve recently invested a lot of money on an advertising blitz. The circulation climbed by about ten per cent, and then fell back again. Very disappointing.’

‘Distribution: that is okay or not?’ asked Wong.

‘We get extremely good positioning from Hollis. Susannah knows the people from Hollis really well, she has relations there. They make sure we get excellent display, right on the counter-front, at all their outlets. But it’s not been enough. Sales are still down. Without the circulation, we can’t get the advertisers. We’re slowly dying. Our backers have given us four weeks and then they’re closing us down.’

Dispensing the bad news had caused the cheerful little man to wilt like an under-watered rubber plant. His shoulders had become round, his chest had caved in and his head had fallen forwards.

‘It’s a great little mag,’ said Joyce. ‘I mean, by Singapore standards, of course.’

‘Thanks.’

Wong told Tin that he wanted to know more about the physical way money moved in and out of the company. The publisher disappeared, returning five minutes later with a bespectacled woman whom he introduced as Sophie Melun, the newspaper’s financial director. ‘Sophie will tell you what you need to know about the money side. I’m going to have to leave you now. I’m heading to Changi to catch a plane to K L, see one of our investors. Ask Susannah or Dudley if you have any questions; they’re in charge while I’m gone. I’ll be back early on Friday.’

Tin put on a toughing-it-out smile and marched out with a wave.

The job thoroughly intrigued the geomancer. The more he studied the firm, the more he was convinced that it stood to succeed or fail on the

grounds of feng shui alone. The company was apparently doing things right in business terms, yet was failing for purely intangible reasons.

After he had finished interviewing Ms Melun and returned to his charts, Joyce looked up from the back issue of *Update* she was reading. 'So what's the diagnosis, doc?'

'The answer is in the birth charts, I think. Each year has its own nine-square number. It takes up the birth chart's middle. The middle number on the top of the turtle's back. You remember that story I told you about the turtle on the River Lo? The number of the year goes down by one as each year begins. So 1998 was a Two Year, 1999 was a One Year, 2000 is a Nine Year and so on.' He showed her a page of charts in a book.

'But each person also has their own nine-square number. You have your own *lo shu* chart. It depends on when you were born. You must find the nature of your own ch'i energy. Then you can see how your fortunes will be. A business, also, has energy. It has a birth date. You can find its nine-square number.'

'Cool. So what's my number? I was born in 1983.'

'The year does not begin on January 1 and continue to December 31. No, it goes from Lunar New Year to Lunar New Year. Your birthday is February 9. So you were born in the Year of Eight.'

'How d'you know my birthday? I don't remember telling you.'

'That was one of the first things I checked. After you joined the office. I had to, of course.'

'To make sure I wasn't like, a monster with bad vibrations that would upset your office, I suppose. Well, I bet you're glad I turned out so nice.'

'Ye-es,' he said, with not quite enough conviction.

Wong busied himself with his charts, and Joyce, quickly bored, wandered off. As the final copy deadline of 12.30 p.m. approached, and each staff member met his or her final deadline for the issue, the atmosphere began to lighten, with people breaking away from their computers and stopping to chat over their desks or stand by the drinks machine.

She quickly struck up a friendship with Dudley Singh, a tall young man of about twenty-five, and they stood by the coffee machine talking at length about the movie stars they hated, which were legion.

In the production department, Susannah Lo took Wong through the technical process in detail. The pages were prepared on the computer, and

then sent to the platemaker.

‘This we call a plate,’ she said. ‘No, no, please don’t touch it.’

Wong whipped his fingers away and apologised.

‘It is very delicate. We have to be very careful, because this is the final product that goes to the printer, from which the actual newspaper is made. It will be collected by the printer very shortly, printed this afternoon, and distributed tomorrow morning. You will see it at the news stands from about seven.’

Ms Lo, a small, unsmiling woman of about forty in a designer suit, had owl-glasses which perched precariously on a tiny nose.

‘Is it available at every news stand?’ Wong asked.

‘There are complex relationships between various publishers, distributors and retailers, which I don’t really want to get into. We are signed with Hollis News Retail as our prime distributor, and they do a pretty good job. We get excellent display at their shops, and they also distribute some to other retail chains, street stands, as well.’

‘Are you aware of any problems in the sections you are boss of?’

Ms Lo pushed her glasses back and replied: ‘No. Production and distribution are fine. I think the problem must be in editorial or marketing.’

The geomancer nodded. He looked back at the page of classified ads in front of him, and tugged at the straggly hairs on his chin.



On Tuesday morning, C F Wong rose at 5.30 as usual, and was in his office at Wai-Wai Mansions soon after 6.30. He gulped down a sharp bowl of Chiuchow tea to wake himself up, and started drawing fresh *lo shu* charts for all the decision-makers and major investors involved with Hong Siu Publishing, complete with water stars and mountain stars. He went on to draw the Four Pillars of Wisdom, and Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches, for each person.

After an hour, he had covered his desk with charts, and started to litter Joyce’s and Winnie’s desks with scribbled sheets.

The young Western woman arrived at 9.30 to find her desk had disappeared under a mass of paperwork. She placed her coffee on the



window sill and plonked herself down heavily on her chair. It was a hydraulic office chair, and she liked to lift it to maximum height, so she could swivel it from side to side, swinging her legs and irritating the others.

‘Wanna hear my theories?’ she asked.

This was the sort of instance when one really had to ask oneself about one’s adherence to the truth, Wong thought. Clearly he did not want to hear her theories. But she was his boss’s client’s daughter.

‘Okay,’ he said, but with so little enthusiasm that he hoped she might get the message.

‘Well. I went to TGIF’s last night. I’m like, “What do you think about *Update*?” And Emma’s like, “It’s really cool.” Becky’s like, “Everybody I know reads it.” Emma’s had two letters in its letters page last month. Anyway, I’m like, “So what could be done to improve it?” and they gave me some ideas. I’ll tell you them,’ she said, generously.

She took a sip of coffee, depositing chocolate powder on her nose, and continued: ‘The first thing we all agreed is that there should be more writing about like bands and less about restaurants and cheezy nightclubs and stuff. Who wants to read so much about boring old food?’

‘I think maybe that you do not understand the publishing business,’ Wong replied. ‘Western pop groups like the Beatles probably will not buy advertisement space in a Singapore magazine. But local restaurants, they will.’

‘The Beatles? The Beatles broke up already. John Lennon is dead. He died two years before I was born.’

‘Well, then he will not be buying an advertisement.’

‘Where you going?’

‘I am going out to buy one. You want to come?’

‘We get it delivered.’

‘I want to buy one from a shop.’

They stepped from the musty, cramped doorway of Wai-Wai Mansions into a dazzling mid-summer Singapore morning and had to virtually shut their eyes against the light as they strolled south on Telok Ayer Street, towards a small cluster of shops near an office complex. The central business area had grown to absorb what had been a quiet road and the background rush of traffic formed a rumbling background hum.

Wong found a streetside newspaper vendor and bought a copy of *Update*. The seller looked at him with suspicion, as if it was somehow indecent for a Chinese man in his fifties to be buying a magazine with a pop star on the cover.

Moving a few metres away from the kiosk, the geomancer opened the magazine and started flicking through the pages.

‘What’re you looking for?’

‘This page.’ Wong flicked towards the back of the journal, and found a section of lonely hearts advertisements.

Joyce tried to, but did not quite succeed in, stifling a smile. It suddenly occurred to her that she knew nothing at all about her boss’s personal life: whether he was living with someone, or had children, or where he lived or what he did after work.

‘Joyce, you do something for me please?’

‘Sure, what?’

‘You go down that street. Take the second road on the right side. You will find some small shops. Will you see if any of them have this magazine? Then buy one from them. And also, buy copies from any news stand you see while you are going. Take a pen and write down on each copy where from. The name of the shop and the street where you bought it. Get as many as you can. Meet back at the office in half an hour.’

‘Doing some sort of survey?’

‘Yes.’

By 10.30, Joyce had returned to the Wai-Wai Mansions with eight copies of the new *Update* and Wong with twelve.

She entered to find that Wong had been scolding Winnie Lim, who had swept up his entire morning’s work and dumped it in a black dustbin bag. ‘Too messy, must be bad feng shui,’ she was saying. ‘Beside, I cannot find my lipstick; a hundred-over sheet of paper on my desk.’

Growling, Wong took the stack of magazines to his meditation room and turned to the lonely hearts page of each copy. He nodded to himself as he looked at where each had been bought, and laid them out across the floor. He wrote notes to himself in Chinese as he examined each issue.

‘Lonely hearts? What’re you looking for?’ Joyce asked. ‘Not a girlfriend, I take it.’

‘Girlfriend no. Answer yes.’

He told her that he had pressed his finger quite firmly onto the plate from which that particular page had been made, while studying the production process. 'See, you can see it here. That tiny mark is the mark I made. But you can only see it on this copy. And that one and that one. You can't see it on any of the others.'

'I guess they must have noticed it and fixed it.'

'Maybe so.'



On Thursday, Wong and McQuinnie spent several hours at the publishing house.

Wong had explained to Susannah Lo and Dudley Singh that he had found several problems. The basic layout of the office needed little change, but there were alterations needed to certain desks.

'The problems are revealed by the *lo shu* charts. The biggest one is the timing of your move. The company has the central *lo shu* number four. When you moved into this building, you moved west, from Victoria Street to Orchard Road, which is in the direction of four, your own number. You should not move towards yourself. This is like pushing two identical magnets together. The energies do not help each other. They fight each other. The result is great effort and hard work, but not much good result. Obviously this is a problem here.' He looked up from the chart at which he had been pointing.

'Please think of it this way. When you move a company, you are like a farmer moving a field of apple trees. You need to wait until the right time of year. Then you carefully dig them up. Then replant them at the right time of year in the right place. This was not done.'

'Whoa, this sounds like major bad news,' said Singh. 'You don't expect us to move out and move in again on the right day, I hope?'

'The shareholders would never agree. Too expensive,' said Ms Lo.

'No, I don't ask you to move,' said the geomancer. 'There are many other actions you can take, much simpler. There are some matters concerning Mr Alberto Tin's personal birth chart. I will go through that with him when he comes back tomorrow. We need a ceremonial re-launching of the company.'

This will be at a precise time on a precise day. This I will discuss with Mr Tin. There are some suitable dates coming. Some within only a few weeks. Also, there are some small changes to make in the editorial section. Just a few small things. The flow of ch'i energy there is too fast. This is not difficult to fix. I need to place some sea salt at certain positions. Sea salt is very *yang*. It will make the ch'i energy more solid. Then, the element of metal—'

'No changes in the production section?' interrupted Ms Lo.

'None.'

'Then I will get back to work. You can talk to Mr Singh alone about the changes in the editorial section.' She rose and walked smartly back to her station.



On Friday, Wong phoned Alberto Tin's mobile phone to hear that he had just landed at Changi Airport. The geomancer and his assistant arranged to meet the publisher at 11.30 a.m. at the Tai Tong Hoi Kee restaurant.

When Tin entered, Wong and McQuinnie rose immediately and told him to accompany them. 'We can come back for dimsum afterwards,' said the geomancer. 'I want to have a long talk with you. Go through your birth chart. Also some matters of office placement. But first, we want to show you something.'

They walked 100 yards down the street, making polite chit-chat, until they came to a kiosk selling journals and books. Wong purchased a hot-off-the-press copy of *Update* and flicked to the editorial letter at the front.

'There are actually two editions of the new *Update*. I'm afraid Ms McQuinnie and I, we did a little changing in one.'

'What? What do you mean?' Tin looked startled.

'We did some, aaah, editing, I think it is called.'

'I don't understand.'

'Do not be afraid. We have not inserted any bad things into your journal. We made it more accurate.'

'But how could you do it? And what did you do?' He started nervously examining the page at which the journal was open.

‘Your staff member Dudley Singh helped us. He formed a friendship with my assistant. You see, we found that the plates of your magazine are actually sent to two output centres. Not one. One makes the magazine you usually see. Ten thousand are printed. The other output centre makes a separate one. Prints 30 000 copies. But you don’t know this.’

‘What? What are you saying?’ Tin’s eyes seemed to want to burst through his spectacles.

‘Let me explain it. I’m better at explaining things than you,’ said Joyce. ‘Hollis News Retail has been like reprinting your newspaper. The ones they sell in their shops, most of them are not your ones, you see. They print their own ones, and they sell them, and they keep the money. They print a large number; 30 164 I think is the exact number. I phoned their printer and managed to wheedle the details out of them.’

‘You are saying they illegally reprint my newspaper, sort of pirate it?’

‘Yes,’ said Wong. ‘You print 10 000. Hollis sells them for you. You know about that. The plates are prepared by the Sam Long Output Centre in your building. But the pages also go to another output centre. A place called Wan Kan Colour Printers. There another 30 000 and some are printed, you see? Wan Kan Colour Printers is a subsidiary of the Hollis Group.’

The chubby publisher was momentarily speechless. Then he recovered himself. ‘How can that be? They have no right to do that. What do they do with them?’

‘Hey, B K, what do you think?’ said Joyce. ‘They sell them, of course. You see, Mr Tin, the actual circulation of your newspaper has grown to like, 40 000 copies a time. A lot of these are like, *separately* printed by Hollis and sold by the Hollis Retail network, which keeps the profits. That is why you see so many people—like me and my friends—buying the thing, but your records show so few sales. It’s quite a neat trick, really.’

Wong nodded. ‘You get all costs. They get all profits.’

‘They are selling 30 000 copies, twice a week, at my expense? Plus their usual cut of my sales? They must be making an absolute fortune.’ Tin was in shock, and breathing heavily. ‘How can they get hold of the pages? Who is giving them to them?’

Mr Wong held up his finger to show Joyce that he would answer this question. ‘We do not like to commit slander and libel upon anyone. But I think maybe you should ask Ms Susannah Lo that question. She is in charge

of the pages after they are finished. And she has relatives in the Hollis Group. Do you remember you told me that yourself? Changes made to the pages after she has taken them do not go into both editions.'

'I just—I just don't understand. How on earth . . . ? But look, if the paper is so successful, and is making helluva big money for them, why are they tricking me and leading me into financial disaster? The thing is about to shut down.'

The geomancer nodded sagely. 'I think maybe they will let your operation crash. They can then buy it cheaply. Then they can launch the magazine again as their own. They know that it is already a success. They can cut you out.'

'I'll sue them. What they have done is criminal. I'll sue them in the courts for every penny they have.'

Joyce giggled. 'Yeah. You should. But you may have to like get in the queue.'

'What do you mean?'

Wong looked into the middle distance. 'The sage Lu Hsueh-an, he said: "There is looking and there is seeing. Many people look. But only the Perfect Man sees."'

The geomancer wagged his finger and turned to Joyce. 'Many people saw the turtles in the River Lo. But only Fu Hsi saw the markings on the turtle's back. So he found the magic square of nine.' He addressed his next comment to Tin.

'You look at this magazine, but you do not see it.'

The publisher just looked confused.

'Can I tell him?' the young woman asked, clapping her hands and almost hopping with glee. 'We made like four changes to the version of the paper that was like stolen and reprinted by Hollis. I mean, Dudley did them really.'

She showed him the masthead on page two. 'First, the publisher's name and registered address and the printers' details have been changed from yours to Hollis's.'

She flicked back to the front page. 'Second, the paper looks the same, but look closely and you notice the name has been changed. It does not say *Update*. It says *Upyours*.'

She opened the magazine again. 'Third, most of the actual articles don't appear in this. Dudley replaced them with what he called "dummy text". They obviously didn't read the thing but just put it into the printing machine and pressed the button. Hee hee.'

Tin, moving in slow motion, took the magazine out of her hands and slowly flicked through the pages with amazement. 'I see. Dudley did all this?'

'Yeah. In minutes. He's pretty cool.'

The publisher was tugging uncomfortably at his collar. 'You said four changes.'

'The fourth one is—I'll show you,' said Joyce, taking the magazine out of his hands again. 'Just here. Look, just read that paragraph. Dudley inserted this little article in the *Upyours* edition about various people.'

Tin scanned the report on page three. 'Good grief, Wong. You guys have insulted practically everyone that counts in this city.'

'Not me,' said Wong. 'Not us. Hollis publishing. Their name is all over the publication. They financed it. They signed it. They printed it. And they distributed it. It is their liability. Not yours. Not mine. Shall we go and have that breakfast now? The *cha siu so* at Tai Tong Hoi Kee very good.'

The two men, Tin in a daze, started to move back towards the restaurant, but Joyce moved in the other direction. 'Bye guys. You go and have a dimsum orgy. I'm meeting Dud for a cappuccino at Starbucks on Orchard Road. He's asked me to do some CD reviews for him. You don't mind me moonlighting a bit, do you, C F? I get the latest CDs before they hit the shops and I get to keep them. Way cool.'

She plugged her ears with her CD headphones before he had a chance to reply, and walked away, her head keeping time with an unheard rhythm.



### 3 A kitchen god's life

*A little mystery always remains. Such is life. The ultimate can never be understood. But this should not frustrate you, Blade of Grass. Knowing that you cannot know is the First Principle.*

*In the year 950, the Ch'an Master Wen-yi was asked: 'What is the First Principle?'*

*He replied: 'If I were to tell you, it would be the Second Principle.'*

*The Record of the Transmission of Light, chuan five, tells the story of Hui-chung. He was a monk. He died in 775. One time, he agreed to take part in a debate. It was about Wu. This is translated as 'nothingness' or 'inexpressibility'.*

*He sat in the chair but said nothing. The time for the debate began. Hui-chung said nothing.*

*The other monk said: 'Please propose your argument so that I can argue.'*

*Hui-chung said: 'I have proposed my argument.'*

*From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom',*

*by C F Wong, part 90.*

This, thought Joyce McQuinnie, is just too weird. C F Wong had just introduced her to an old Indian guy who appeared to be wearing two tiny wigs, one on each ear. Small but thick mats of white hair, they caught and widened her eyes, and it took a considerable effort to wrench her gaze from



the man's miniature ear-muffs to his heavy, hooded eyes as she shook his hand. No way could they be natural. He told her his name.

'Uhh, hi.'

'Hello. Extremely pleased to meet you I'm sure, Ms McQuinnie,' he said.

'Yeah, thanks, good to meet you, too, er . . .' She had immediately forgotten his name.

'Dilip Kenneth Sinha,' he reminded her. 'My friends call me Dilip, or D K, or 'you silly old fool,' more likely. The more honest of them, anyway.' He flashed a row of long, horse-like teeth, gave a staccato laugh like a burst of gunfire and turned his palms outwards in an elaborate flourish. 'Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh.'

'Ha ha. Just call me Jo.'

He was rather over-dressed for the location, in an expensively tailored dark Nehru-collared suit. The rather featureless outfit on his tall, stooping, waist-less body made him look like an upholstered banana. His hair was white, contrasting sharply with his dark, almost aubergine, skin. His eyebrows looked like blow-dried caterpillars. He was extremely hirsute. She noticed that the peppery five o'clock shadow on his face went all the way up to the bags under his eyes. She decided that the wiglets on his ears might be real after all.

Dilip Sinha beamed at her and swayed slightly. He had a tendency to move his head up and down and diagonally like the spring-headed dolls you find on taxi dashboards, but his wrinkle-nested eyes were pleasantly grandfatherly, and he spoke with easy sincerity. 'Delighted to have you join us tonight. Can't remember when we last had a visitor to the mystics. Many, many moons, it must have been.'

'Thanks for having me,' she said, blushing at her phrase, which she suddenly thought better suited to a six year old leaving a birthday party.

'I think our last visitor was six years ago, or was it seven? It was the year after Chandrika's brother left. Now when would that have been?' He started to ramble inconsequentially about dates and Joyce found his droney tone hard to listen to. His old-fashioned Edwardian English had a little Indian twang, and there was a clipped quality to some of the words that she was beginning to recognise as a distinctively Singaporean intonation.

She was grateful that the old man had proved so welcoming, as she felt totally adrift, for many reasons: the people, the time, the location, the

planet. What was she doing here? She had a strange feeling that she was sticking her head out of a box. She felt oddly exposed. She felt alien. Her breathing was slow but her heart was beating fast. She felt tired, as if energy was pouring out of a hole in her abdomen. Concentrating was an effort.

Scheduled tonight was a special emergency meeting of the Investigative Advisory Committee of the Singapore Union of Industrial Mystics. The union had only a handful of active members, although Wong had told her that meetings had attracted as many as twenty-five in the past, and there were more than forty names in the books. Visitors were technically not allowed, but Wong had phoned a couple of other committee members in advance and received permission for Joyce to be there. 'These are the real old masters of Eastern thought. They use different names for different things, but really, it is all the same under the skin. A rose by any other name is still smelling, right, understand or not?'

At first she had been reluctant to cancel the just-hangingout evening she had planned with her friends. She found Wong to be difficult company at the best of times, and was rather daunted by the idea of spending her evening in a meeting with three or four Wongs, some of whom may even be more weird and impenetrable than he. But her friends had been blown over by her account of her adventures in Malaysia—'You saw like a *real corpse*?—and she had decided that it was worth sacrificing a night out for an experience that may make a story to tell. 'Yeah-yeah, I'll come,' she had said to Wong earlier that day. 'It's cool. You have to keep pushing the envelope, right?'

'Right,' Wong had replied in a neutral tone to disguise his bafflement.

Shortly before 8 p.m., the geomancer and his assistant had marched through some narrow streets in what seemed to be an older part of town, and had turned a corner to enter a large area of restaurants and open-air food stalls. It was so poorly lit that Joyce wondered how diners could see what they were eating. After walking a few yards, she realised that the restaurant through which they were walking was part of a series of street cafes, forming a lengthened, disjointed circle, with the jumbled seating for the public filling the centre of the ring.

Joyce was struck by the sights and smells. It was dark. It was warm. There was something almost frighteningly surreal about the surroundings. In the shadows, fat hawkers appeared and disappeared in the steam from

their cooking carts, like djinns conjured up from lamps. Their faces, lit from beneath by their cooking fires, seemed barely half-human. Every few seconds, there would be a sudden woosh and an explosion of conjurer's smoke as a catty of wet bok choi slid into a super-heated giant wok, before being energetically slapped around with extra-long chopsticks. The sounds of the food market seemed indecently loud in the blackness, which made the night seem further advanced than it was. Against the background roar of several hundred diners talking in that half-shouted style common to Chinese restaurants, there were the cries of the independent vendors with their portable stove-carts, the sizzle of the 'show' dishes, the clinks of a thousand bottles and dishes, and the honks of the traffic backed-up on the adjoining high street.

She was half-conscious that it was the sort of lively nighttime, fire-lit gathering that was somehow primal: people must have gathered at dusk like this to share cooked meats over bonfires ever since man evolved. She sensed the appeal of allowing herself to be sucked into the scene, but she felt too unsettled and unconnected to submit to it. She couldn't relax. She felt her world was one of brightly lit, surgically clean McDonald's restaurants. This dark, noisy doppelganger was all just a bit too far beyond the boundaries, she mused.

The feng shui master slid his thin form gracefully through the tables, evidently knowing where he was going, although in his companion's eyes, the restaurants all blurred into one pandemonious dining hall. She followed more tentatively, squinting at her feet to make sure she did not tread on ill-placed bags, children or small dogs.

Suddenly, she felt hungry. Wafts of pungent smoke were drifting from the cooking areas, carrying tempting smells of singed meats. Chilli in the air mingled with the odours of cumin and coriander, the comforting fragrance of boiled rice and the tang of fresh coconut. There was sweet mango, sour shrimp paste, something that smelled like burnt sugar and a hundred other smells she couldn't identify.

But now where was Wong? He had been right in front of her a minute ago . . .

There. The geomancer had abruptly stopped and clasped hands with an Indian man of about sixty who had been sitting at a stained, circular table surrounded by small stools. Wong and Sinha had greeted each other with an

odd combination of stiff formality and easy warmth. Clasp ing four hands together, they had looked into each other's eyes and nodded their heads, their eyes still locked. Then they had swapped verbal greetings while maintaining the tight grip on each other's fingers.

'Been too long, Wong. Must meet more often, stop waiting for the mystics.'

'True. We should make more effort. Let us not end this evening without choosing another date.'

'Madam Xu's already here. She has gone to talk to her friend first. Some old customers of hers here, she says. Come, sit. And the young lady.'

Wong had then introduced his assistant to the old Indian, Sinha, an astrologer, and the three of them took their seats. A thin young man had immediately appeared through the haze from the stoves with three plastic tumblers full of lukewarm Chinese tea.

Feeling a little more secure now that they had settled at a table, Joyce sipped the tepid liquid and cast her eyes around at the scene. It always surprised her to see so many young children and even babies out and about at night. You would never see under-fives running around at night in England, she mused. It was milk at seven and bed at half-past, no arguments. Yet in Singapore, children simply seemed to adopt their parents' schedule, staying up until eleven or midnight, and if they got tired, they just put their heads on the tables and slept where they were.

As she scanned the crowd, she noticed an elegant, chop-stick-thin middle-aged woman approaching their table. On her bony shoulders hung a black *cheong-saam* with red piping. 'Madam Xu!' Sinha leapt to his feet and held the fortune teller's hands to guide her to her seat. Before sitting, she bowed and smiled at Wong, who rose and bowed his own greeting.

'And is this the child?' Madam Xu asked, smiling at Joyce. 'Hello, *xiao pangyou*. How old are you?'

'Seventeen,' said Joyce, although she had not started a conversation by volunteering such information since she had been a child.

'And do you want to be a mystic or fortune teller or something similar when you grow up?'

'Erm. I don't know. Maybe. I'm just like, studying with Mr Wong at the moment. To write something for my project. It's very kind of you to let me join the meeting. I hope I won't be in the way.' Joyce was shocked to hear

herself accepting the role of a polite, model child—something she had never been.

‘I’m sure there will be no problem. Mr Wong explained on the phone that you understood the form of these meetings, that no information derived here ever goes outside. Superintendent Tan is right behind me, and he will speak of things that are official secrets.’

Joyce nodded. ‘Yes, C F told me already. It’s all hush-hush top secret, I know.’

Suddenly a rather delicate male hand appeared on Madam Xu’s shoulder, and a thirty-ish Chinese face loomed over her head. ‘Hello guys and dolls. Sorry I’m late. Quite unforgivable, I know. Helluva cheeky, since I called the meeting. Shall I sit here, is it?’

The question was perfunctory, since it was the only seat remaining. Superintendent Tan greeted Sinha and Wong and blinked quizzically at McQuinnie. A stocky, Malay-Chinese man with a pear-shaped head, he eased himself down into the chair and his eyebrows rose at the young woman opposite. Not just his clothes, but his entire body seemed to have the rumpled air of the overworked civil servant.

‘Please, Superintendent, I must introduce my assistant to you,’ said Wong. ‘I spoke to the others to tell them she is coming. I could not get through to you. You are so busy. She is Joyce McQuinnie. She is helping me this summer. I hope you do not mind she is joining us. She is the daughter of a friend of one of my bosses, so I cannot say no.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ said Joyce, glaring at Wong.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said the Superintendent, arranging a large pile of papers on the table. ‘Bit young, isn’t she, Wong? I mean, for all this stuff? You know what we sometimes get into. Murders and rapes and things.’

‘I’m not young,’ said Joyce. ‘I know a lot of stuff. You’d be surprised. And I’ve helped Mr Wong on cases already. Murders and things, whatever,’ she added, as if she were discussing the irritation quotient of mosquitoes.

The ever-smiling Madam Xu leaned forwards and beamed at the police detective. ‘She is very mature. I can feel it. You need not worry, Superintendent. Almost as knowledgeable as some of my girls.’

‘I hope not,’ said Tan. ‘Anyway, if you are all comfortable with her here, it’s okay with me too. Good to see you all. You are looking well Madam Xu, and you, Wong. And how’s my old friend Dilip?’

‘I am extremely well and in fine fettle, Superintendent,’ said the elderly Indian. ‘For my happiness to be complete, only your presence was needed. And now you are here.’ He bowed his head gallantly.

‘Very nice speaking as usual,’ said the police officer. ‘Well, first, let me apologise for keeping you waiting. Helluva bad show. But this is worth waiting for. The case which I shall place before you is an interesting one in my humble opinion. Let me just wet my whistle and I will give you all the juiciest details. Under the usual condition of strict secrecy of course,’ he added with a special look at the youngest member of the party.

The waiter, familiar with the Superintendent’s needs, was already approaching with a pot of Iron Buddha. Wong had a detailed conversation in one of the Chinese dialects with another waiter, to order the food.

The group then waited in a not uncomfortable silence for the Superintendent’s tea to be poured. He took a slow sip, lowered the tumbler, and cleared his throat.

‘He’s quite a good storyteller,’ put in Madam Xu in a stage whisper to Joyce. ‘I think he should be in the theatre.’



‘I want you to picture, if you will, a large restaurant in a hotel,’ Tan said. ‘It’s just after three o’clock in the afternoon, and the last luncher has just dabbed his lips with his starched linen napkin and signed his bill. “Thank you, sir,” says the waitress as the man leaves. The restaurant is now empty, except for this last waitress, whose name is Chen Soo. All the other waiting staff have fled for their mid-afternoon break. Most of the kitchen staff have also left, but she hears at least one person still bustling inside, probably the head chef, who is usually last to leave. She also sees a young assistant chef slipping through the swing doors into the kitchen, so it seems that business in there is not quite finished. You follow so far, is it?’

Joyce found it hard to visualise anything, let alone a spotless hotel restaurant, while sitting in this distracting environment. Trying to cut out the sizzling explosions of wet vegetables hitting woks, she forced herself to focus on Tan’s lips and listen to his slightly sing-songy voice. He had smooth, babyish cheeks, and a slight fuzz on his upper lip. She guessed that

he did not need to shave every day and would have a completely hairless chest. He spoke quickly, but giving due weight to each word. She decided that Madam Xu was right: he had a good sense of the dramatic.

‘You with me?’ continued Tan. ‘Now this Miss Chen Soo—birthday 10, 10, 1978, birth place Singapore—clears up the last items on the last diner’s table.’

All three members of the mystics carefully scribbled down this detail, like students receiving exam tips.

‘But the lull in the proceedings was not expected to last long. At one of the hotel’s other restaurants, the afternoon tea service had just started, and the food and beverage manager had asked her to help out there. But for this particular room, things would be quiet until about four, when preparations would start for a private cocktail party, which would last from 5 p.m. to about seven, after which the tables would be re-set for the seafood buffet in the evening. In other words, a typical afternoon in the café of a modern, five-star hotel, you see?

‘A few minutes later, Chen Soo wheels the used dishes into the trolley parking area just on the other side of the kitchen swing doors. By this time, there is only one person left in the kitchen: the head chef, Peter Leuttenberg, who she sees getting something from the freezer. She returns outside. She puts a fresh table cloth on the table. It takes her only a few seconds, maybe a minute. She hears a voice. “Afternoon, sweetie.” It is the sous chef, a rather dishy European man by the name of Pascal von Berger, who is in the habit of greeting all the young women, despite not being able to remember their names.’

‘Where is he from, chief? A Swiss, I suppose,’ Sinha asked.

‘Er, hang on a moment.’ The Superintendent flicked through the papers in front of him. ‘That’s right, he’s from Lausanne, birth date 7, 4, 1964.’

‘It figures. All Swiss, these hotel people.’

‘Ms Chen looks up and greets him as he passes through the swing doors into the kitchen. A few seconds later, she hears a cry, a shout. The word sounds like “Murder”. But it couldn’t be, she thinks. Why shout such a word? Perhaps the men are playing games? She knows that several of the cooks are lively young men—they are playing pranks from time to time. She stands there, not knowing what to do, when Pascal races out of the

kitchen. “Miss, miss,” he is calling. “Help, call an ambulance. Peter is ill. Quickly.””

Superintendent Tan leaned forward, knowing that he had now fully caught the attention of his listeners. He speeded up his speech. ‘Chen Soo heads for the captain’s desk at the front of the restaurant. She presses the code to summon hotel security on a red alert. She asks Pascal what is wrong with the executive chef. He says: “Peter is on the floor. I think he is dead.” She calls an ambulance. And then the two of them go into the kitchen. Chen notices that von Berger is pale and shivering, in shock. He says to her: “Maybe you do not want to see. It is bad. He is hurt. There is much blood.” But Chen follows him. There, close to the main ovens, the executive chef, a Californian, lies dead on the floor. His hair is wet and matted. There is a spreading pool of blood under him, from a wound apparently on his skull. His head is battered, all out of shape. He seems to be . . .’

He paused, dramatically. ‘. . . dead!’

The detective leaned back in his chair and looked at the faces of his four listeners. ‘Murdered.’

He picked at his right index finger nail for a moment before continuing. ‘Now von Berger says he was still breathing slightly when he found him. The chef had lifted his hand to make some sort of gesture, and he had tried to speak. He said something about a waiter. But unlike in the movies, he named no names.’

He paused again as the first dishes of food arrived. Joyce looked suspiciously at the chipped bowls, one of which contained a green vegetable and the other something in a lurid orange-brown sauce. She wondered if there would be anything she could eat.

The officer appreciatively breathed in a lung-full of steam from the plate of garlicky choi sum and oyster sauce. He helped himself to a large portion as he spoke: ‘Hotel security arrives within minutes. Two officers. One is an old Nepalese man named Shiva and one a Malay called Sik. Shiva checks the body. He reckons the chef is dead. Sik stands guard at the door of the kitchen. Medics arrive a few minutes later and confirm the man’s soul has made its final journey.’

‘Hold on, hold on, my good man.’ This is Dilip Sinha, who was dishing a generous portion of an unidentifiable substance onto Joyce McQuinnie’s



plate, ignoring her protests. 'The door of the kitchen, you say? Surely a big main kitchen in a hotel would have several doors?'

'Quite right,' the Superintendent replied. 'But this wasn't the main kitchen. The hotel is a big one, and had three kitchens, one large and two small. This was a smallish subsidiary kitchen, known as Kitchen Three, which dealt mostly with just two outlets, and also supplied canapés and what-not for cocktail parties in the function rooms on that side of the hotel. This kitchen had only three doors. A main door into the café, a staff entry door and a fire escape.'

'May we ask which hotel? Would it be the Continental Park Pacific?'

'It would. I see you saw this morning's *Straits Times* story about this particular incident.'

'I did.'

Madam Xu made a clucking noise with her tongue. 'This is clearly going to be a difficult case, Superintendent. These modern hotels are such big, sprawling complexes. I presume the staff door leads into a network of rooms and corridors, to which literally dozens of staff would have access.'

'Not dozens, Madam Xu. Hundreds. Five-hundred-over, I think.'

The Superintendent heaped chilli prawns onto his plate. 'Someone had smashed open the head of the executive chef and then fled through one of the doors, we first thought. But this case is simpler and at the same time more complicated than it seems. You see, Shiva went to open the staff door and found he couldn't get through. Chen, the waitress, explained that there was some building work going on in the staff quarters. The construction people had temporarily closed off that passage. A sign had gone up in the staff room explaining that the staff access to Kitchen Three would be blocked for a few days, and staff would have to arrive and leave by the main door, through the coffee shop.'

Sinha raised one long, bony index finger to make a point. 'But wouldn't that be very disruptive to the restaurant, to have staff tramping in and out all the time?'

'Not necessarily. Staff arrived in the kitchen well before lunch time, to prepare the food. The customers rarely arrived before noon and ninety per cent of them go by 2.30 p.m. The kitchen staff would clear up and leave for their fifteen-minute breaks, which were staggered between three and four o'clock.'

‘What about the fire escape?’ This was Madam Xu.

‘Yes, the fire escape. This would be the perfect exit for a murderer on the run. It goes straight from the kitchen to a corridor on a lower floor which leads right out to the back gardens. A murderer using that route could have made a speedy exit, and gone from the kitchen to the back garden in less than a minute. Except for one thing. He or she didn’t.’

Joyce asked: ‘Was that locked as well?’

‘No. The fire escape wasn’t locked. But it was wired to an alarm, as are all the fire exits in that hotel. You cannot go in or out of a fire exit without tripping the alarm. The security desk confirmed that the door had not been tampered with, nor had the alarm gone off. Therefore, the murderer did not use that exit, you see.’

Joyce spoke indistinctly with her mouth full of surprisingly delicious onion cake. ‘So he killed the guy and then went out through the coffee shop. Sorry, Mr Sinha. I didn’t mean to spray you.’

Madam Xu lowered her tumbler to the table with a dramatic thud, slopping brown *bo lei* onto the table cloth. ‘Unless,’ she said, dramatically, ‘he had not left.’

The police officer smiled. ‘Yes. A definite and frightening possibility, which did occur to the officers, as they stood in the kitchen. After all, the body was freshly murdered. But remember the security guards. Sik had been guarding the door throughout that first hour, and Shiva and the first of my men who arrived checked the kitchen carefully. There are not that many places to hide in a small kitchen like that, and all of them were checked carefully. There was no one there.’

‘Air-conditioner vent?’ asked Sinha.

‘Checked,’ said the Superintendent. ‘It was too greasy to climb out of. Even if you had done it, you would have left lots of evidence.’

‘So the murderer must have left through the café door,’ said Joyce. ‘Must have been a waiter. He said it was a waiter.’

Madam Xu said: ‘What exactly were the dead man’s last words? And you said he made a gesture. What was his gesture?’

‘He said, “It was that stupid waiter,” and tried to wave his hand towards the washing area—but by that time, there was no one standing on that side of the kitchen. And there are no doors or windows in that part.’

‘So you questioned the waiters?’ said Madam Xu.

The Superintendent finished chewing a mouthful of orange vegetable before replying. 'Of course. We interviewed all the waiters. But remember, several people saw him alive after all the waiters had gone. The last people to see him alive were a waitress, a junior cook and the sous chef. None of these can technically be described as a "waiter". On the other hand, if you are dying, you may be a bit muddle-headed and may be not too accurate about your words, agree or not? Maybe he meant the waitress or some other staff member.'

'Birth date? Of the dead man?' This was Wong.

'Ahhhh . . .' Tan leafed through his papers. 'Twentieth of September, 1957. Born in . . . ah, Sacramento.' He used his chopsticks to fill his mouth with rice and spoke out of the side of his teeth. 'Anyway, you know what police procedure is. We were pretty thorough. All the lunch-time staff were interviewed, and they all said Peter Leuttenberg was alive and well when they last saw him. Naturally, suspicion fell most heavily on the last person to leave the kitchen. It was a young man named Wu Kang, who was a junior assistant chef, birth date 4, 9, 1976, Singapore. Ms Chen—the witness I mentioned right at the beginning of my story—she remembers seeing one young kitchen assistant re-entering the kitchen while she was clearing the last table, you remember I said before? That was Wu. He says he was only there for a few seconds. His story seems to stand up—and to help us time the event.

'You will also remember that Chen says she popped into the kitchen for a moment a few minutes after seeing Wu enter, and she saw Leuttenberg alive and Wu gone. Wu's story was the same as that of the other staff. He said he left the kitchen, popped back in a few minutes later to pick up his hat, and left almost immediately. He said he had said goodbye to Leuttenberg, who was preparing a tiramisu for himself. He said he recalls seeing Ms Chen tidying table forty-three as he left. It all tallies, time-wise.'

Sinha asked: 'Tiramisu? At three in the afternoon?'

'Mr Leuttenberg was in the habit of eating tiramisu every afternoon at about this time. No one begrudges the senior chef his little quirks. And there's something else that was strange.'

'Yes,' said Wong. 'The murder weapon.'

'How did you know?'

'You have not mentioned it yet, so I knew.'

‘Well, you are right, Wong, the murder weapon is a factor here.’

‘What was it?’ asked Joyce. ‘A saucepan, I suppose? Or a leg of lamb, like in the story?’

‘No, Miss,’ said the Superintendent, with a laugh. ‘I have read Roald Dahl too. There was no leg of lamb to be used as a murder weapon and then consumed by the investigating officers. They do not eat on duty. Nor drink. This is a rule. This is Singapore. We do things properly here. The murder weapon was a problem. We weren’t able to find it. It was something big and heavy, like a saucepan—the dent in Leuttenberg’s head was evidence of that. But where was it? We examined everything in that kitchen. We looked at every moveable object, trying to find hairs or tissue or fresh blood that matched Leuttenberg’s. It was difficult, because kitchen utensils are always covered with fingerprints and almost always have microscopic bits of blood on them. Anyway, it was a tough job that took several of our best people many, many hours. We found nothing. Not a sausage.’

‘You were looking for a sausage?’ asked Wong. ‘You think it was a sausage?’

‘Not a sausage,’ said Joyce. ‘It’s just an expression. It means, well, like if you have some place that is completely bare, and there is absolutely like, nothing at all there, you go: Not a sausage.’

‘Why?’

There was silence. Joyce usually felt compelled to be the chief apologist of the English language, but this one foxed her.

The Superintendent, too, was stumped. He absently stirred the food on his plate with his chopsticks. ‘Never really thought about it. Helluva strange. It’s just what you say.’ He looked vaguely annoyed, then continued: ‘Anyway, the murder weapon must have been removed from the kitchen, or it had been scrubbed clean and returned to its normal place.’

‘You searched the hotel?’ asked Wong.

‘We did all the things we could think of. Wu, the young assistant, had been seen by several witnesses walking towards the main kitchen. He was carrying nothing, although he could theoretically have had some small item hidden within his clothing. But nothing big enough to have done the damage that was done to Leuttenberg’s head, you see? Chen was in the coffee shop throughout lunch, right up to the time when we interviewed her. There was no murder weapon visible in the café. Pascal von Berger, the

sous chef who found the body, arrived in the café carrying nothing, and had nothing in his hands until the time we interviewed him.’

Joyce put her elbows on the table. ‘Perhaps it could have been something small but heavy like a lead pipe, which he could have hidden in his clothes? You know, like “Colonel Mustard in the study with a lead pipe.” You know the game?’

‘I do,’ said the Superintendent. ‘But I have never enjoyed it. My father was a colonel. I have always been uncomfortable with the idea that anyone with the title Colonel could be a murderer.’

Joyce was excited. ‘I know, Wu or von Berger could have hidden the lead pipe in their chef’s hats!’

‘A cute idea, Miss, if we can label any possible technique by a killer as cute. But I repeat. No, it couldn’t have been a small lead pipe. Leuttenberg was hit with an object so heavy that it crushed part of his skull, and then his head hit the floor with such a crash, such an impact, that his skull was crushed on the other side as well. It was almost as if a large microwave oven had been dropped on his head from a height. You see, is it?’

‘Right. Well, that must have been what it was,’ said the young woman.

‘No. We checked all the microwaves and things like that in that kitchen. You would be able to tell if one had been dropped on someone’s head all right. There were two portable ovens, and they were not broken or anything. They had not been moved recently.’

Madam Xu, who was shuffling some fortune-telling cards, asked: ‘Did you believe young Mr Wu? He says he left the chief cook alive?’

‘I think I do. I can find no motive for him to murder his boss—especially since he was the last person to see him in that kitchen before the body was found. It would have been pretty stupid, not that that has stopped other murderers from committing other such crimes.’

Madam Xu looked into her cup. ‘My calculations and my cards and my tea leaves and my brain tell me the same thing: Mr Pascal. If you believe Mr Wu is telling the truth, it seems to me that the case would look quite bad for Mr Pascal.’

‘Pascal von Berger, the sous chef. Yes. The man who found the dead body. The flirtatious one. “Afternoon sweetie.” Exactly what it seemed to us when we discussed the case in the station. Von Berger must have gone in, bashed the man, and then run out, pretending that he had found him dead.’

‘Surely you have a precise time of death?’ asked Sinha. ‘Does your forensic pathologist not give you some aid on this count?’

The Superintendent grimaced to find his tea had gone cold, and waved at the waiter to bring a fresh pot. ‘She did, she did. It is an impressive science, but it cannot tell the time of death to the minute. There are so many complicating factors, such as the condition of the man and the warmth of the room. A kitchen, you know, is very hot. Kitchens are traditionally not air-conditioned. She reckons he had died maybe twenty minutes or half an hour before she saw him, you see.’

‘Which means?’

‘Our pathologist saw him about thirteen minutes after the first call to police. That ties up with the other evidence, because it means he died sometime between when the other kitchen staff left the kitchen and when the waitress Chen Soo saw him dead. This we knew. So the pathologist did not add too much to our basic store of knowledge there.’

Wong was looking at the floor plans. ‘Excuse me, Superintendent Tan, I find the design of the kitchen very relevant to this case.’

‘Well, you would, wouldn’t you?’ said Tan. ‘Being a feng shui man.’

The geomancer pointed to a plan of the kitchen. ‘This is interesting. The kitchen is east of the centre of the building. This is where it should be. It is extremely well-designed in feng shui terms. It is perfect, even. Kitchens are rather troublesome from a feng shui point of view. They are full of significant elements: water taps, water pipes, windows, metal objects, knives. And of course, the stove fire. All important things. East is best, in my opinion, because it supports water. Now the door of the kitchen is here. In the south part of the room. The fridges and freezers are far away. In the northwest of the room, over here. The ovens are on the opposite side, the northeast part. The man was found here. Near the fridges.’

‘You have got your thing upside down. North goes on top,’ said Joyce.

‘No! South goes on top,’ snapped Wong. ‘Always. They teach you nothing in school these days. Nothing.’

Tan said: ‘Yes, the corpse was there, on the floor. When von Berger first went in, he couldn’t see the body because it was on the floor, and all these things—these work tables and benches and what-nots—were in the way.’

Wong pencilled compass points—with south on top—onto the floor plan. ‘Water ch’i does not mix well with the ch’i of the northeast, which is the

energy of the soil. It is a combination which creates instability. Thus it is not surprising that he died there.'

Madam Xu clucked impatiently. 'It is nice that the murderer chose the right part of the kitchen to do his murdering in, but does this tell us who the murderer is, C F?'

'No. Not at all.'

Sinha laughed. 'The implication is that the murderer was you, C F, because only you would know the precise spot to do the dastardly deed in. Ha!'

'It was not me,' said Wong. 'I was in my office at that time.'

'That's what they all say,' said Tan.

'Let us find more profitable avenues of investigation,' said Sinha. The Indian placed his fingertips together and balanced his chin on them. 'Superintendent. When did all this happen, may I ask? The day before yesterday, was it?'

'Correct.'

'Two days ago. You have a narrow circle of suspects. Surely given enough interrogation—even using your gentle, law-abiding methods, which do not include hitting them with *lathis*, as would be done in India—one or other will soon break down and reveal all?'

The police officer looked disappointed. 'That's what we thought. We have talked to the last three people to see the victim and drawn blanks. We talked to Wu, we talked to von Berger, we talked to Chen, until we were blue in the face. They all stick rigidly to their stories and insist they are innocent. We haven't been able to find enough of a hole to slide a cigarette paper in, even. The male waiters who left earlier also have cast-iron stories. We are stuck. I need you to move us forwards, can or not?'

This was a plea. It called for some serious mystical thinking. For two minutes, no one spoke. Madam Xu looked carefully at her cards and scribbled calculations, and Sinha flicked through an almanac of astrological charts for the year. Wong continued scratching out *lo shu* diagrams for the main players in the mystery.

Madam Xu broke the silence. 'It is a tricky problem.'

'Indeed it is,' said Sinha. 'You have a body in a kitchen, but no murder weapon, no murderer and no exit or hiding place. It doesn't hang together very well at all.'

The Superintendent sighed. 'It is a curious one. We thought that you guys, with your, ah, unusual methods of investigation, might be able to reveal facts that are not uncovered by normal police procedure.'

'Well, now, I have a question for you,' said the old Indian astrologer. 'How did von Berger know it was a murder? He shouted out "murder", but at that time, all he saw was a body. It could have been an accident. Leuttenberg may have just fallen over or something, for all he knew at that time.'

The Superintendent lifted his bowl of rice and vigorously shovelled rice into his mouth. 'What do the rest of you think about that?' he asked with his mouth full.

Madam Xu said: 'That seems to be an interesting little unresolved oddity in this case. Tell us that bit again.'

'Of course,' said Tan. 'Chen, the waitress, insists she heard von Berger—who else could it have been?—in the kitchen, shouting "murder". But von Berger says he just gasped with horror but has no recollection of saying that word.'

Sinha said: 'I have it. Perhaps it was Leuttenberg—perhaps it was the chef's last word before von Berger threw the microwave or whatever at him and then picked it up and washed the blood and tissue fibres off it before running out to get Chen to call the security guards?'

'Could have been,' said the Superintendent. 'But whoever said "murder", does it matter? Does it take us any further? I think not.'

Silence returned.

Wong wrinkled his brow. 'Which company was having a cocktail party that evening in that room?'

The question was unexpected. The Superintendent blinked. Then he looked through his notes. 'Didn't think to ask. Let me have a look. Er, it should be here somewhere, it must be here. I have the banqueting schedule. Hang on a minute. Here it is: Eagle Flight Life. It's an insurance company, I think. What's the relevance?'

'So,' said Wong. 'The American's spirit was taken away by an eagle. That seems fitting.'

'What are you on about, Wong? You're going all metaphysical on us, is it?' The Superintendent sat up in his chair.



‘No, no,’ said the geomancer. ‘I only point out the symbolism. When did you last go to a corporate cocktail party in Singapore which did not have a centrepiece?’

Sinha was getting interested. ‘You mean, flowers or a logo of some sort? A statue?’

‘Or an ice sculpture.’

‘Of course.’

‘You always have an ice sculpture. Almost always,’ said the geomancer. ‘Large, heavy, hard. Perfect for a strong man to pick up, use to smash over the head of another man. When you have finished? You just stick it into the hot oven or sink. By the time someone has a look at it, it will be nothing but water.’

The Superintendent was scribbling notes. ‘I like your thinking, Wong. The ice sculpture.’

‘An ice sculpture would make sense,’ said Madam Xu. ‘You think von Berger did it, then? Hit him with an ice sculpture? Stuck it in the oven, and then cried murder?’

‘Ice sculptures are usually the job of younger assistants in the kitchen. I think if I was the Superintendent, I would ask the cooking staff about Mr Wu’s jobs. One of them may well have been to make ice sculptures. Or look after them in the kitchen freezers.’

‘But if Wu did it, he wouldn’t have had much time. Ms Chen saw Leuttenberg alive—and alone—in the kitchen, and von Berger arrived a few minutes later,’ said the Superintendent.

‘But did the waitress see the chief chef in the kitchen?’ asked Wong, lifting his floor plan of the kitchen. ‘She said she saw him getting something out of the freezer. This is in the northeast. Back of the room. Far from the main door. Fridge doors always open on the left side, except for some funny ones in Japan. Hotel fridges are always big. If he was getting something from the fridge, the door would be open. She would not be able to see him from the main door, which is in the south of this room.’

‘Maybe, like, she could see his tall hat over the top of the fridge door,’ said Joyce.

‘Maybe she did see his hat. But who was wearing it? Maybe it was not the chief chef taking something out of the fridge. Maybe it was Wu Kang

re-arranging the things in the freezer. So that people did not notice that the ice sculpture was missing.'

'Could be. Maybe so.' The Superintendent was sitting bolt upright now. 'But how did he get out of the kitchen in the two minutes before von Berger arrived?'

Wong looked at his floor plan again. 'I think maybe the dead man did not say anything about a stupid waiter. I think he said something about a dumb waiter. Now this is a technical term used in architecture. In kitchen architecture, especially so. It means food elevator.'

'Food elevator.' Madam Xu considered the unfamiliar phrase carefully.

'There are no food elevators in this kitchen,' said Tan.

'No. Not now. But I think there used to be. Just here, behind the cabinets over the washing part. I think maybe they are still there. Not used. That is how he got out.'

'How on earth could you possibly know that?' asked Sinha.

Madam Xu was equally amazed. 'If you can tell that with your feng shui powers, I will give up fortune-telling and start taking feng shui lessons from you.'

'Well, it is not really a guess. I did the feng shui for this hotel when it was refurbished about five years ago myself. That is why the kitchen is arranged perfectly. Remember I was telling you?' He folded his arms, proudly.

'Ah, inside information,' said the fortune teller.

'Prior knowledge. This is not fair,' said the astrologer. 'It is not truly making use of the mystic arts.'

Wong looked put out. 'The sage Hsun Tzu said: "We should think about Heaven but also not reject what man alone can do."'

'I still think it was von Berger,' said Madam Xu. 'Young Wu has no motive. But von Berger has many dealings with the chief chef, and also would be likely to get the man's job after he died.'

This appeared to be a direct attack on the geomancer's theory, and all eyes turned to him. 'Always a little mystery remains,' said Wong. 'We help Mr Tan. We give him ideas. But we do not do his job.'

Madam Xu leaned forwards. 'But Wong, why did von Berger shout "murder" before he knew it was a murder? There was no weapon around, so

how did he know? I think this throws suspicion on him. He was trying to throw people off the scent.'

'That I cannot say,' said Wong.

Sinha said: 'Could it have been the victim who shouted "murder"?''

'No. I think not. Watch,' said Wong. He suddenly stood up and picked up the soup tureen and swung it as if he were about to strike his assistant with it.

'Hey!' shrieked Joyce, lifting her arms to protect her head. 'What are you doing?'

Wong halted abruptly and put the dish down. Then he sat down. Joyce sat with her arms still in front of her head, blinking at him from behind her wrists.

'Sorry. Just a demonstration,' said the geomancer. 'You see? When you are being attacked, you shout "hey" or "no" or "help" or "don't" or you just scream. A man being attacked does not shout "murder". He is not murdered yet.'

Joyce lowered her arms. 'Hey, you know, I think I can answer that one. My sister went out with a French guy once.'

'Do enlighten us, Miss,' said Sinha.

'The guy, Pascal, is Swiss, right? People say Swiss and you think he speaks Swiss-German, right? But he was from Lausanne. That's the west bit, the Frenchy bit of Switzerland.'

'And . . . ?' said Madam Xu.

'Pascal von Berger didn't go: "Murder!" He sees the body and the blood and he's like, "Merde". It's a bad word in French. French guys say it all the time, whenever they are angry or surprised or anything. It means "shit", if you'll pardon my French.'

'Shit is also a French word?' asked Wong.

'No, shit is English. I just said "pardon my French" because, well, never mind. And "merde" is French for "murder", I mean, for "shit". To someone who doesn't know any French, it maybe sounds like "Murder". He goes in there and he goes, "Oh shit", only, he says it in French: "Merde".'

The Superintendent clapped. 'Well done, Missy, very good.'

The police officer turned and looked at the others. 'I knew I could count on you to push this little mystery along a bit. You have my head buzzing

with ideas so well that I am not even going to wait for the Sichuan beef, but I am going to race back to the station. Oh, hang on.'

A sizzling dish of dark pieces of meat flecked with slivers of kumquat peel arrived and was placed in the centre of the table.

'Perhaps I'll just have a taste,' said the Superintendent, his chopsticks already digging into the steaming platter.

Joyce, looking down, realised that she too had emptied her bowl and was ready for more.



## 4 The lion's share

*In the fourth century BC, there was a man named Chuang Tzu. He went to sleep. He had a dream. And in his dream he was a butterfly. He could fly. He fluttered over the bushes and the grass and the flowers. He was part of the wind. The wind was part of him. He forgot that he had ever been a man. He thought only of his life as a butterfly.*

*Then he woke up. He found he was a man. 'I am a man and I was only a butterfly in my dream,' he said. But a voice inside him said no. You are a butterfly. You are dreaming that you are a man.*

*The following night the man Chuang Tzu went to bed. He felt himself returning to life as the butterfly Chuang Tzu. But was he beginning to dream? Or was he beginning to wake up?*

*And so it is with you, Blade of Grass. You think you are tangible. That which is intangible is a small part of your life. But from time to time you realise the truth. You are intangible. That which is tangible is only a small part of your life.*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'

by C F Wong, part 110.

Winnie Lim held up the phone. 'For you,' she said to C F Wong. She blew on her nails, evidently worried that the action of picking up the handset may have disturbed the perfect surface of the two-tone emulsion on them.

Joyce McQuinnie laughed. 'Don't sound so surprised. He's allowed to get a call himself in his own office once in a while.'

The geomancer took a few seconds to extricate himself from his thoughts, then lowered his pen, blew at the ink in his journal to dry it, and snapped the book shut. He exhaled slowly, as if he were expelling a long ghost from deep within his scrawny trunk. Then he reached for the handset.

'Wai? Hello?'

'Good morning, C F. So it is apparent that you have a secretary now. That's a new departure, is it not? How can you afford it? They cost more than 3000 dollars these days, correct?' said Dilip Sinha.

'That is Winnie Lim. She has been working here many years.'

'Oh, Ms Lim is still there, is she? I didn't realise. How is it that you usually answer your own calls, then?'

'She has many calls. More than me. She has many friends. Likes to talk-talk all day all night. My assistant the same. So her phone always engaged. When it is engaged the phone it transfers to me. So I am answering the calls usually.'

'So in fact you are wrong to say that Winnie Lim is your secretary,' said the astrologer. 'The truth is that you are her secretary.'

Wong thought for a moment. 'Yes. Maybe so. I take many messages for her.'

Sinha sighed. 'I really, really must give you a few lessons in basic man-management skills one of these days. But let us turn our thoughts to brighter things. Like work. Like high-paying work, no less. My dear C F, how would you like an unusual and well-remunerated assignment? You've done gardens, parks and golf greens, haven't you?'

'Have.'

'Well, here's something you haven't done before, I'll bet: a jungle.'

Wong was slightly taken aback.

'Hmm? Sifu? Did you hear that? You still there?'

'Yes, yes, I hear you. A jungle, you say.'

'Yes, you've never done a jungle before, have you, C F?'

'You are right, but a jungle is a wild place, not a place for people. I do *yang feng shui*, which is only for places where people live.'

He noticed Joyce looking over, happy to eavesdrop on what might turn out to be an enjoyable jaunt. She gave him the benefit of her thoughts in a

stage whisper. 'A jungle? Go for it.' She showed him her thumbs.

In his ear, he heard Sinha's strange, staccato laugh.

'Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh. Wait till you hear the details. This will be fun, I think. It is a sort of park—I think they call it a theme park, you know, what they used to call a safari park a few years ago. It's partly natural rainforest, partly man-made. Imported some lions at great expense. It's quite new. It's been going for about three months in Sarawak, near where my aunt lives. Someone told her about it and she called me. However, what it definitely needs, in my opinion, is a bit of help from you.'

'Business is bad?'

'Business has stopped. A lion ate the owners.'

'Ah. I understand. This is not a good thing.'

'It is, as you say, not a good thing. Especially for the owners. Will you do it?'

'I don't know whether I can . . .'

'You can,' said Joyce. 'I'll come with you,' she added, as if such an offer were a plus-factor.

'Let me think about it,' said Wong.

'Let me put it this way,' said the old astrologer. 'It's a rush job, so it's all expenses plus your usual overseas rate plus fifty per cent.'



Two days later, after an exchange of faxes providing a basic contract and a deposit paid by bank transfer, Wong, Mc Quinnie and Sinha found themselves in a hired Proton Saga heading towards Tambi's Trek, a tourist attraction set up on the outskirts of Miri. This 'oil town' was the staging post on the way to the more remote parts of East Malaysia, the astrologer explained. If you wanted to go to the interior, you took a boat up the Baram River. If you wanted to go to Lawas or Limbas, you would need good weather, a friendly pilot and a Twin Otter.

Joyce had initially been excited by the fact that the hired car had a high-quality built-in audio system, but her companions' horrified complaints about her choice of music left her in self-imposed exile on the back seat with her portable player.

‘Then of course there is the ultimate adventure entertainment—a trip into Mulu,’ Sinha said. ‘But only for the Indiana Joneses among us. Uh-uh-uh-uh.’

‘What’s so great about Mulu? Any good CD shops there? The ones I’ve been to in Singapore suck.’

‘Suck what?’ asked Sinha.

‘Don’t ask,’ said Wong.

‘There are, I think I can rightly say, no CD shops whatsoever in Mulu.’

Joyce was speechless.

Ignoring her horrified eyes, Sinha continued: ‘Mulu is the location of a famous cave. It is difficult to get to. You need a long journey by river boat, and then by narrow longboat when the river becomes too small. Or you can fly, but only if the bats are not leaving the cave. The bats have right of way, you see.’

‘Oh. What’s so great about a cave?’

‘This is not just a cave. This is more like an underground world. The largest room in the cave is the Sarawak Chamber. It is very, very large. You can fit forty jumbo jets within it. The longest passage, Clearwater Cave, is 36 miles long. For the sake of comparison, the whole of Orchard Road is a mere 1.5 miles long, although this may come as a surprise to those who walk the length of it, as I regularly do, knowing the importance of—’

‘Forty jumbo jets?’ The young woman was astonished. ‘Have they tried it?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose so,’ said the astrologer.

‘Cool. Are we going there?’

‘No. Tambi’s Trek is a little diversion arranged for travellers on the way to these natural wonders, or those with young children who perhaps don’t wish to go all the way into the virgin jungle. It is also perfect for lazy travellers, who want to say that they have been to a real jungle and seen real jungle animals, but want to be back the same night for a hamburger and a glass of Coca-Cola at their hotel. You know the sort. As such, I think it is an excellent idea and will be a great financial success. As long as they can stop the lions eating the staff.’





This time, Wong did all the driving. His seemingly erratic driving style, learned as a teenage truck driver in Guangdong, was frightening in Singapore, but seemed to fit well with the noticeably more chaotic roads of East Malaysia. He drove largely in the middle of the road, sometimes overtaking on one side, and sometimes the other. The deep potholes which caused all of them to occasionally bounce off their seats did not seem to bother him at all. He nosed through herds of sheep without fear of injury to vehicle or livestock. He read the map stretched out on the steering wheel as he drove, preferring to navigate himself than risk being led astray by miscommunication.

The sun glared in at the windows, as did staring locals and heavy-eyed bullocks. The car's air-conditioner, cranked up to full blast, fought a losing battle to keep the interior comfortable.

After half an hour's driving without incident, his passengers started to relax. Not being a conversationalist, Wong liked having a definite task to occupy himself with, and refused all offers of relief at the wheel.

Sinha was quite the opposite. His tall frame draped languidly back over the front passenger seat (which seemed to wilt under his weight), he talked endlessly about people he had met, and seemed to be able to continue indefinitely with minimal reaction from his listeners.

He told his half-listening audience several stories, starting with one about the time he went in search of a levitator who was rumoured to live in the hill country near Simla in northern India. He said he had made copious inquiries before setting out, to make sure the man was a genuine defyer of gravity, and not one of those yogic flyers who bounce cross-legged on mattresses, while disciples take carefully timed photographs.

'I was repeatedly assured that he was the real thing, a genuine floating man, so eventually I set out, and took a sixteen-hour bus ride to the foothills of the mountain where he lived. From there, it was a case of questioning the locals until I found someone who knew the man I wanted. But he refused to guide me up the mountain until I gave him a large sum of money. This I did. I would have given him money afterwards anyway, because I believe in the distributing of my largesse to the poor back in the country of my forebears. What a strange word that is, forebears. Does it have anything to do with bears? I suppose not. Anyway, the man wanted it up-front, so I gave it to him. He scurried away to put it in the bank, which means, I suspect, he

dropped it in a hole in the earth under his bed—the poor are very predictable, I'm sorry to say, and predictability is one of the great shortcomings of the human race. In fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons the poor are poor and remain poor is because they behave entirely predictably. It is only the man who breaks free of the rut who has a chance of improving his circumstances. Otherwise one is like a bullock, pulling a plough along the same furrow, year in, year out. Indeed, you would think that the poor in northern India would realise this, because they have an example of bullocks trapped in identical ruts right in front of their very eyes, all year—'

'The levitating man?' This was Joyce. 'Can you go back to him, please?'

'Oh yes, sorry, I was digressing. I'll get back to the point. You'll have to forgive me, but I have always tended to wander off on a tangent. Not that I'm the worst digressor I know. I had an uncle, a politician in Uttar Pradesh, who was once asked to give a ten-minute vote of thanks before a meal. What with his digressions, his speech lasted almost an hour and the meal was ruined. The first bits cooked had gone cold and congealed, and the bits still on the heat had burned. Yes, yes, the levitator.'

Sinha rearranged his long legs and draped one arm behind his chair. 'I went into the deep, dark candle-lit cave where the man was supposed to live—my guide refused to come with me—apparently you were not supposed to approach the levitator unless you were an acolyte who had done years of training with him. I found a perfectly normal man sitting at a table. It was a high, Western-style table and he sat there as if he was about to eat a Sunday roast beef lunch. Which of course he wasn't, because you don't eat roast beef in India. Not unless you want to get into big trouble. Which I did once, and there's a tale worth telling. It was when I was about twenty, and had just left college. But I'll tell you that one afterwards, shall I? The levitator. He was sitting at a table, as I say, upon which there were candles and a shrine with several gods in it. Saying his prayers, no doubt. We had to try several dialects before we found one we both shared, and soon we were chatting like we had been friends since the egg. I stood there, bowing respectfully, and he sat there with his hands together. We talked about all sorts of things, about mysticism, about religious leaders we both respected, about our favourite foods.'

‘Eventually, I had had enough of polite chit-chat and asked him directly about the levitation, and he said, yes, he could do it. But when I asked him to demonstrate, he just changed the subject. I brought the subject back again. He changed it again. I could not persuade him to agree to lift himself even an inch off the ground for my benefit. He just sat there smiling at me. When I asked again, rather more forcefully, he gave an interesting reply, which I will always remember. He said: “Such skills are not given to us for demonstrations, but for high purposes.” So I replied, “Showing a traveller your skill so that he can spread the word to thousands outside is a high purpose, is it not?” And he said, “Your idea of a high purpose is not my idea of a high purpose. A high purpose can be to rise in the air to glorify the gods, even if there is no one watching except the gods themselves. Indeed, that is the highest purpose, because the glory is for the gods alone.”’

Sinha bit at his thumbnail and shifted slightly in his seat, causing it to creak alarmingly. After a brief pause, he continued. ‘I took this as a cop-out, although I did not say this to him, of course. It seemed to me that he was saying that he would only levitate when no one could see him do so, which meant that there would never be any proof. Anyway, there was still something tangibly holy about the man, so I remained polite to him, and thanked him. “My visit is over,” I said, then I bowed and took my leave. I was just walking away, when I thought of something. He said a high purpose can be to glorify the gods. He was glorifying the gods even then, worshipping the shrine on his table. I suddenly thought . . . I was about 20 or 30 yards away. I spun around and then stooped slightly, to look under the table. There was no stool. There was no chair. The man was sitting on nothing, his crossed-legs and bottom floating about 2 feet off the ground. He had been levitating all along! I started to walk forwards again, but he spoke again. “Your visit is over,” he said. Then he blew out the candles, and the cave was plunged into darkness. I could not see 1 inch in front of my face. So I stopped and called out for him to light a flame. But there was silence. I walked back out towards the light. I never saw the man again.’

For a moment Sinha paused, his eyes fixed on a place far distant. ‘Getting back from there was another adventure. I imagined, that I, too, could levitate. So I decided to try it, while I was on the holy mountain, close to the influences of the levitator. Mountains, for some reason, always seem holy. Even in the Christian Bible, you will note how Moses and Jesus

went up mountains to see their god. It is something to do with the idea of vastness and stillness, of course, something that can best be appreciated by a visit to the Himalayas, which I first visited as a boy of nine . . .’

After half an hour, Joyce, who was still sitting in the back, retreated into music. Whenever Sinha turned around to emphasise a point, she would just nod sagely. He never seemed to notice the little earphone wires which ran from her ears to her bag.



There was an exhausting sameness about the villages through which they travelled, and all three were visibly glad when they reached the gate of the park and were met by a small, fuzzy-faced, pop-eyed man by the name of Icksan Dubeya.

‘Go up to the house first,’ he said. ‘There you meet the owner, Sulim Abeya Tambi. He will explain to you what he wants.’

‘What was the position of the two people who died, please?’ Wong asked.

‘They were on the jungle trek. You’ll see later.’

‘No, I think he means like, the position in the company,’ said Joyce. ‘You just said go and see the owner. But our contact in Malaysia, he said the owners were eaten.’

‘Yes, they were co-owners with Mr Tambi. The people who were eaten. Mr and Mrs Legge. They were all partners. But now they are dead. Eaten by lions. Not a nice way to go.’ The man smiled, showing a mouthful of dirty teeth.

‘So Mr Tambi has become owner of the whole operation?’ Joyce asked, doing her Girl Detective bit. ‘Like, is it better for him that way? With the others out of the way?’

‘You may think so.’

She found Dubeya’s tone hard to interpret. Did he mean it was better, or that we might think it better but would be wrong? His expression was made even harder to fathom by the fact that his eyes appeared to be looking in different directions. He gruffly pointed to a fork in the road ahead of them, and told them to head to the left and follow the No Entry signs.

Wong lifted his clutch foot and the car jerked back to life.

They slowly travelled up a long, curving drive. To the left, they saw a tall fence enclosing a thick forest—doubtless the outer edge of the animal sanctuary. They passed several small buildings of a practical nature—garages, storerooms, something that looked like a stable—before the road turned again, and the Proton scrunched onto the gravel of a large, low house. It was built in yellow stone, in the old colonial style, but had a certain boxiness about it that gave away its more recent origins.

The geomancer ran his eyes over the outside of the building carefully. It was modelled on the plantation villas of early Singapore. The house was raised on piles, Malay style, but had European deep verandahs. Decorated eaves and suspended lattice-work in Kallang fashion suggested a Chinese architect, but one with eclectic tastes: the windows had Portuguese shutters.

The lower verandahs were hung with mosquito nets in a rather lurid shade of pink, presently common in that part of Malaysia. Sinha laughed: ‘No doubt some scientist worked out the colour the creatures would like least, ignoring the fact that human beings would find it equally repugnant.’

Standing in the porch was their host. Sulim Abeya Tambi was an obese, sweaty man with curls of jet hair plastered onto a mottled dark brown face. He wore white robes in light cotton, which were too thin to be flattering, and his belly bounced in lazy synchronisation with his waddling gait. He was tall, more than 2 metres in height, and had hands like spades.

‘Come in, come in, how nice of you to come, do come and make yourselves comfortable,’ he sang effusively, in a high and wispy voice, but with an unexpectedly educated English accent. He led the visitors into an old-fashioned hall, featuring dark stained wood and a mess of garments and boots on a low table.

They followed him through to a large, open sitting room, and were urged to sit on some rather uncomfortable rattan furniture. Tambi then disappeared to find a servant boy to bring them some fresh king coconut.

‘Ouch. I hate these seats,’ said Joyce, squirming on a low armchair. ‘They’ve got like, little sharp bits which go right through your Levi’s.’

After the bustle and activity of their arrival, silence returned to the room. And then, the quiet sounds of the jungle started to drift in over the verandah: buzzing, fizzing noises, plus a sort of low hiss. Occasionally there were bird calls which sounded almost human. Joyce had turned off her

personal stereo out of politeness, but there was still a song playing in her mind. She consciously stopped it running through her head, and then rose to go and stand on the verandah. She stared at the sea of green before her. Something made a caw caw sound far in the distance. There was something hypnotic about the scene.

Three minutes later, their rotund host reappeared and seated himself grandly on a wicker chair which had a pair of fold-out planks on which he rested his ankles. 'So glad to have you here. It's been an absolutely horrible summer, and we desperately need to start afresh—which is where your advice is needed,' he said.

Little vertical lines appeared above his eyebrows as he assumed an expression of deeply felt pain. 'Three weeks ago we were on the brink of the realisation of a dream. We had twenty-five full-time staff. We had a host of animals, including five lions. All the advertising was lined up in magazines throughout the country and the region even. Journalists were waiting to come and see what we had in store. Travel agents were taking bookings for tours which would include a visit to Tambi's Trek, which would fast become the most essential part of any visit to Malaysia.'

He took a swig of coconut through a straw that seemed ridiculously thin to feed such a huge frame.

'And then it all went wrong.' He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, as if he was speaking to the ceiling. 'The death of my dear, dear friends and partners meant the death of my dream. Who would come to an animal park where even the people who run it were not safe? Who would even come near such a place?'

He suddenly opened his eyes and stared at his visitors.

'Would you? Would you? Would you, young lady?'

'Well, um,' said Joyce, who wondered whether she should point out that she *had* comenear such a place.

'Exactly. You would not. All the tours were cancelled. All the advertising was withdrawn. All the staff—ungrateful wretches—fled except for my cousin Dubeya, whom you met. I prepared, as is my tradition, to go into a long period of mourning, and abandon the project. I was devastated, as I had known Gerry and Martha Legge for many years and considered them my best friends. But then, I thought, No. Let me try once more. In their

memory. They loved animals, as I do. Let me do it, not for myself, but for them.'

He moved forwards, lowered his feet to the ground, and shifted to the edge of his seat. He looked directly into Wong's eyes. The others watched uncomfortably as the chair tilted forwards under his weight.

'And that is what you have to do for me. Make it safe. Not only make it safe, but give it the feeling of safety. Make everyone who steps into Tambi's Trek feel this is the most secure place in the world. Make them feel they can leave their children and babies on the ground here and nothing will happen to them. Reorganise. Redesign. Check every inch of the house. Check every inch of the grounds. If it costs money, I don't mind. What changes you want me to make, I will make. It may cost me millions, but closing it down and abandoning my ideas will also cost me millions.'

Tambi's expression changed again, this time to one of a humble supplicant. 'I am not asking much,' he said. 'Only a miracle. Can you do this?'

Wong looked down at the briefing papers in front of him for a moment. Then he looked Tambi in the eye. 'Miracles we have fifteen per cent extra surcharge. Is it okay?'



Wong spent the next four hours sitting at a huge dining table—it seemed designed to seat about thirty people—with his book of charts, a map of the theme-park grounds, and a map of the district in front of him. He scribbled, he scrawled, he calculated, he drew charts on tracing paper, he overlaid sheets onto sheets, he looked at books full of trigrams, he mumbled to himself and he pulled at the hairs on his chin.

Joyce wandered around the house, and peered out of the windows at the jungle. There were weird-sounding birds calling and unseen creatures chattering and she thought she could hear a lion roar. It was all so deliciously exciting and exotic! It really was like being in a movie. She imagined herself a jungle dweller, greeting a nervous visitor—Brad Pitt, preferably—and impressing him with her ability to run a fabulous home in the depths of the rainforest. She paced the corridors, lost in a fantasy.

Suddenly chancing upon the wild-eyed Dubeya emerging from what she had thought was an empty room, she suddenly felt frightened, and returned to sit by Wong in the dining room.

Sinha slept for a few hours in a guest room, and then woke up suddenly at tea time, coming downstairs with his white hair standing on end and a raging thirst for earl grey.

He arrived just in time to hear Wong's initial exegesis of the site to his young assistant. 'There are problems. I can see. We have too much water to the west. Right next to the mountains. This is known as "mountain star falling into water". It is not a good sign. This needs to be fixed.'

'Oh right, so we are going to move the lake and the mountain,' said Joyce. 'Fine. I'll do that and you can get on with something else.'

'It would be hard to move the lake and the mountain,' Wong said. 'We must compensate for it by other ways. But there are good signs on this big map too. Look further this way. You see this range of mountains. It forms almost an embracing road. A path of affection. Roads curving around things are good. See how this line embraces this part here? This means that Tambi's Trek is in part of a dragon's lair.'

He pulled the close-up map of the theme park closer to him, and then compared the two. 'There seems to be an arm of this mountain range coming down here, which actually comes into the park. It forms a lifted-up flat bit here. What do you call it? A platter?'

'A plateau.'

'Yes. Now this good force will come down this way. But is being dispersed by the wind. We need a body of water to stop it dispersing. There is a body of water just here. It needs to be made a bit bigger until it comes nearer to the plateau. We will tell them to make it wider. If they can. Or set up a spring or waterfall. Or even a tap. At this point here.'

Tambi, who had been hovering in the doorway, entered the room and peered over the geomancer's shoulder. 'I am fascinated that you identified this part as the interesting part. Can you tell, from this map, what is under here? We once had some visitors who were in the mining business, and they said there could be ore under here. Possible?'

'Yes, I think so,' said the geomancer. 'This shape of the mountains and the water is very common for metal underground. Look. The soil ch'i here leads to this flat part. Then there is the water here. This part is strong,



thriving. But soil ch'i and water ch'i do not thrive together. Unless there is metal ch'i between them. Soil ch'i damages water ch'i. But soil-metal-water is what we call the support cycle of the Later Heaven. This is a good area. It may be because there is metal hidden here, under.'

'Absolutely fascinating,' said Tambi, wiping his sweaty hands on his white trousers. 'I await your full report with interest.'

After a preliminary examination of the area on paper, Wong told the others he would spend the afternoon doing a feng shui reading of the house, and devote the following day to travelling around the park itself.



During a heavy dinner at the same long table that night, they heard the grim story of the Legges.

'He was a wonderful man. He loved the lions. And they loved him,' said Tambi.

'They ate him,' said Joyce.

'Yes, but that was because of a misjudgement on his part. Lions, you see—and animals in general, I suppose—they behave instinctively. They do what they have been programmed to do, like computers. They have no choices.'

He paused and took a long drag from his cigar—a rather damp cheroot which he had had trouble lighting.

'Lions, you may or may not know, do not eat three meals a day like we do. They gorge themselves on meat one day, and will happily go for the next three, four, five days with nothing at all to eat. They are quite docile, especially just after a meal. But you would not want to get out of the car next to them when they haven't eaten for many days and are ready for their next meal.'

'Is that what the unfortunate couple did?' Sinha asked. 'Dear me. It doesn't bear thinking about. I had a great uncle who was eaten by one of the last tigers in south China. It's really quite a good story—'

Tambi interrupted: 'It was most unpleasant. There was no one with them, of course, so we had to piece it together afterwards. What we think happened is that Martha and Gerald went in to the Trek in the middle of the

morning, because they had heard that one of the wildebeest had been seen limping badly, and also because a rare bird had been reported in the sanctuary, some crested something-or-other. The lions were due to be fed later that day, so were hungry. Normally, there is no danger, even in going in when the lions have not been fed—as long as you do not get out of the car near one of the beasts. They know they cannot bite through metal. They perceive the cars as big, metal, inedible beasts. They will leave you alone if you stay in the car. Our lions are well-trained. When we are feeding them, we take the meat in, we throw it on the ground, then we press the car horn repeatedly. This sound they have learned is their summons to dinner. We stay in the car. Absolutely crucial.’

He shifted his weight in his chair, which creaked loudly, and took another drag from his cigar.

‘But they did not. They got out of the car. Heaven knows why. Gerald had a miraculous ability to be friendly with the lions—they would literally eat out of his hand. I have seen them take a piece of liver from his hand. But to get out of the car on feeding day before the lions have been fed is not wise.’

Tambi screwed up his face in an expression of agony. His voice cracked. ‘For some reason—I don’t know why—for some reason they thought they would risk it. My cousin Dubeya found the bodies. He had gone in to feed the lions about two hours after the Legges had been seen alive for the last time. He found their four-wheel-drive car on the edge of the road with the doors open on both sides.’

He reached forwards and stirred a large pot of glass vermicelli. A pungent aroma of chilli and lemongrass drifted over the table from a dish of unidentified meat.

‘The remains of Martha and Gerald were stretched over an area of many yards. It was not a pleasant sight. Lions, you see, do not go primarily for flesh. They go for entrails, first. If you ever see a big cat eating an animal, you will see it will go for the belly first, rip it open, and then pull out the internal organs, the colon, the stomach. Only later will it devour the muscles. The whole thing was a mess.’

He shivered. ‘The staff fled. Everyone went except my cousin. Picking up the pieces of the Legges must have been an unbelievably terrible job. Dubeya did it—after we had the police in, of course, to check the scene.

The remains were sent for autopsy. Death by misadventure. They were tucked away in coffins by the time their relatives arrived to bury them.'

Yuk,' said Joyce. 'What a horrible story.'

Tambi nodded. 'A horrible story. Now it is only me and Dubeya—two humans and five lions. More lions than humans in this place.'

The servant boy, who apparently did not count as a human, entered with more dishes.

Tambi turned to Joyce: 'I hope you brought a camera, dear child. You'll see lots of birds and some strange cow that you only get in this part of the world.'

'Neat,' the young woman replied, without enthusiasm.

'We go into the park tomorrow,' said Wong. 'The lions, I hope they have been fed already.'

'Actually, feeding time is tomorrow night. But don't worry. You'll be quite safe. Dubeya will go in with you. I may even come myself. We will be with you at all times. Your internal organs will be quite safe. Now, who would like some chicken liver?'



The next morning, Wong did not appear for breakfast. The servant boy told Tambi that the old Chinese man had risen very early, had a bite in the kitchen, and then had spent the morning walking around the outside of the house and drawing plans.

Tambi later found Wong working at a desk in his bedroom.

'Good to see you are taking your mission so seriously. What have you discovered?'

The old geomancer pulled out a list he had made in tiny, finely drawn Chinese characters. 'There are many small changes you need to make to this house. But not difficult or expensive. Problem really is that it is long, narrow. Runs south to north. This means imbalance of directional ch'i energy. Not enough from west and east. You can compensate for such problems. I will make list for you in English. No problem I think.'

'And what about our troublesome little jungle?'

‘There is water problem and dispersal of ch’i problem. But these can be fixed too. This is not well-designed to be jungle park. I see there is a new fence which is not on the map. To the west. Just here.’ Wong stood up and pointed out of the window. ‘Behind the trees. That fence not on map. Also there is some equipment there.’

‘Oh, yes. Well, we started to make some changes soon after the Legges died. There is some, er, swampy ground there that needs draining, so we put draining equipment in. We took some advice from a local *bomoh*, and he said it was okay that we cut off a bit of the jungle and work on it a bit. There’s still plenty of room left for the lions.’

‘But cutting that area off is very bad. Bad for flow of energy. Bad for feng shui. And there should be no swamp problem there, I think. Maybe mistake.’

‘We’ll fix it. It’s only a temporary problem. Now come down and have a cup of tea. I understand that you had breakfast at 5.30. That’s two and a half hours ago. Definitely you must be thirsty or hungry again.’

As they walked down the wide steps, Wong pointed to the ground-floor corridor on the left. ‘That secret room also caused me a problem. Wasted one-two hours trying to work it out. Not on floor map of house. Very clever. Should have told me first. But then I guess you are paying for my service, hour by hour.’ Wong laughed.

Tambi looked uncomfortable. ‘What secret room?’

‘The one that is between your room there and the west room.’

‘Oh.’ The man was uncomfortable. ‘That’s a security device. Keep the money and stuff in there. The main safe, for the takings. When we get some takings, that is. After all, there will be thousands of strangers wandering around the park.’

‘I didn’t see a safe in there,’ said Wong. ‘Just papers and all that muddy equipment.’

‘You went in? But how . . . ?’

‘The door was locked but I could open. Hope you don’t mind. You told me to do detailed feng shui reading. Whole house. Every inch.’

‘Yes, I did, of course. Obviously, I don’t mind. It concerns me a bit that the room with the safe can be broken into so easily, that’s all.’

‘I saw no safe.’

‘The safe hasn’t arrived yet,’ said Tambi. ‘Anyway, it’s time to get us all into the jungle. Why don’t you go and collect the others—I think they are still in the breakfast room—and I’ll meet you around the back of the house in twenty minutes.’

Wong blinked at him, a little nervous.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Tambi. ‘We’ll all go in together.’



Tambi led the party from Singapore around one side of the house where their hired car and a large multi-terrain vehicle were standing next to a tall wire fence with barbed wire on the top. ‘This entrance is only for staff. It will get us to the east side of the lake much faster than going the normal way. It will also take us right over the section where my unfortunate friends were killed. You said you wanted to see that, right, Mr Wong? Give you a feel for the gruesome events of three weeks ago. I think the blood has all been washed away by now, but for me, the stain will always be there. I can never forget it.’ He shook his head slowly.

Abruptly brightening, he gestured to the vehicle on the left. ‘You go in your car. Dubeya and me, we’ll go in this one.’

‘Why not we all go together in one car?’ said Wong. ‘It will be better if we are all together. You can answer my questions.’

‘Are you kidding?’ said Tambi. ‘I would never get my fat gut into that little car. I’ve had this vehicle specially adapted for me—you see the special double-sized seat? But don’t worry. We’ll drive in front, and we’ll go really slowly. There’s no chance of getting lost. No danger, that’s the Tambi’s Trek guarantee.’

‘This car, will it be okay in the mud?’ asked Wong.

‘It will be okay. It’s a bit muddy just here, but once we get past those trees we get onto a proper path. There’ll be no problem, I assure you.’ He picked up a dark camera bag. ‘I’ve brought my video camera. I’ll give you a souvenir tape of yourselves in the jungle. It’s a service we are planning to offer to our best customers.’ He climbed with some difficulty into the car with some help from his cousin.

Wong took the driver's seat in the Proton, with Joyce next to him and Sinha in the back.

The young woman was complaining about the breakfast. 'I rang Melissa. I'm like, "Hi, Melissa, guess what I've had for breakfast?" And she's like, "Blueberry pop-tarts?" And I'm like, "Rice and chilli and salty fish." And she's like, "That is sooo weird." I mean, I don't mind a bit of spice now and then, but for breakfast? Who can eat that for breakfast? I asked the boy if he had any toast but he didn't understand English.'

' *Nasi lemak* you had,' said Wong. 'Good Malay breakfast. Very delicious.'

Dubeya, having heaved his cousin into the back of the jeep, hopped down, and opened, one at a time, each of the two sets of double gates for the cars to drive into the park.

The four-wheel-drive car climbed smoothly over the rocks and headed at a sedate 15 kilometres an hour towards an opening in a line of trees.

The Proton at first jerked and swayed around on the uneven, rutted area of stones and mud close to the gate, but Wong steered the car into the ruts left by the larger vehicle, and the two cars were soon moving steadily forwards in tandem. The gates closed automatically behind them.

Swinging to the right beyond the trees, they found a narrow concrete road and soon picked up speed to a leisurely 20 kilometres an hour.

'Funny how Tambi does not know names of animals,' said the geomancer.

'I noticed that too,' the old astrologer said. ' "Some strange cow that you only get in this part of the world." You'd think he'd know the name of it.'

'Maybe the dead guys were the animal experts,' said Joyce. 'He's just the money. They've written a fab guidebook.' She was leafing through the *Tambi's Trek Spotter's Guide*, which the Legges had prepared before their deaths. 'There are three, four, five things I wouldn't mind seeing. There's a kind of checklist thing here in this book.'

She flipped through the pages. 'I wanna see the lions of course. Then there's the binturong, which is also known as a bear-cat. Looks like a bear, but the size of a cat. Then we've got to see the colugo, which is a flying lemur, whatever that is. Looks like a cross between a squirrel and a bat. Then I wanna see a pangolin: "A scaly armour-plated mammal which rolls

into a tight ball when threatened.” Oh yeah, and this must be the cow he mentioned, this thing called the banteng.’

Joyce scanned the trees around them for interesting animals, but it was the sounds that really marked off the area as jungle. The humming and buzzing became loud and seemed to form a dense aural wall around them. A distant bird gave a plaintive cry. ‘A-why? A-why? A-why?’ it seemed to be saying.

‘Peacock,’ Wong explained. ‘Mating call.’

There was a flash in front of them as a red bird swooped over the car and disappeared into a canopy of trees. There appeared to be a second bird, following about 60 centimetres behind it, but Joyce realised after a moment that the first bird had a cluster of feathers on the end of a long thin tail.

‘Paradise bird,’ said Wong.

‘This is kinda cool,’ said Joyce. ‘Wish I had a proper camera with a zoom thing. I hope we get close up to the animals.’

She lapsed into silence as they entered the rainforest proper. On some parts of the road, the trees met overhead, and they found themselves in an arboreal tunnel, with flickering shadows running the length of the car. The woody canopy was heavily festooned with epiphytes, giving the impression of having been decorated. Giant mushrooms sprouted from trunks supported by immensely thick root buttresses. The air inside the car quickly turned humid, and there was a pungent, earthy smell.

After ten minutes, their eyes became accustomed to the shadows under the thick, leafy canopies, and they started to spot animals in the trees: Bulwer’s pheasants, Bornean gibbons, white-bellied woodpeckers and other curious climbing beasts that none of them could name. A huge variety of large, colourful butterflies and birds seemed to fill the gap between the bushes and the canopy.

‘Listen. What’s that? What’s that sound? Can you hear something?’ asked Sinha.

‘What? You mean lions or what? Where? I can’t see them,’ said Joyce, looking around.

‘No. Some noise in the car. Sssss, like air coming out of a balloon.’

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘CF?’

‘Don’t hear.’

There was a sudden intake of breath from Sinha in the back seat. 'Wong,' he said, quietly. 'Wong,' he breathed again in a high-pitched whisper.

Wong was preoccupied with the road, leaning over his steering wheel as if he could see better that way. 'Have a bad feeling,' he said to himself. 'Tambi driving too fast.'

'Joyce,' said Sinha, louder and more urgently.

'You okay?' Joyce turned around. She noticed that his face was set, his eyes were wide open and he was barely moving his lips.

'I think I've found out why Martha and Gerald Legge got out of the car in the jungle,' he said, very quietly. 'It wasn't to pet the lions. It was because they were not alone in the car. Joyce, I don't want you to move a muscle. Stay calm when I tell you this. There's a large snake in the footwell just under your seat. It is coiled up. At the moment its head is facing to the back of the car and it is looking at me.'

The young woman gasped and covered her mouth with her hands.

'Wong, did you hear what I said?' asked the astrologer.

Wong gave a single nod. He had a deep-rooted fear of snakes, and appeared to have stopped breathing. 'Will turn around. Drive back to the gate.' The geomancer peered out of the window. The path was only as wide as a single vehicle, and he would have to drive onto rough ground to change the direction of the car.

'No,' spat Sinha. 'Don't bump it around. It may get annoyed. I think just try and drive as smoothly as you can.'

'But I must go out of this jungle. Then we can leave the car. We cannot leave the car if we stay here,' said the geomancer, driving slowly and craning his neck forwards to find a flat section of ground where he could turn the car around. 'There are hungry lions.'

'Ooooooh,' yelped Joyce. 'What's it doing now? Can't we get it out of the car? Is it still under me? Eeeeeeeee.'

'Bump is here,' warned Wong, as the car approached a small pothole in the road.

Joyce lifted her legs off the ground as the car jerked slightly and righted itself.

'It didn't like that,' whispered Sinha. 'It hit its head on the underside of the seat. It's looking ahead at where your feet were, Joyce. I think you had better just stop the car, Wong, as carefully as you can.'



‘Ooooooh,’ Joyce squealed. ‘Can you get rid of it? Ask Tambi. He’ll know how to get rid of it.’

‘Unless he put it here,’ said Wong, bringing the car to a gradual halt. ‘*Aiyeeyea.*’

‘We really, really have to get out of the car. This is a highly dangerous snake. It’s a king cobra,’ said Sinha. ‘It looks highly irritable, too. I think it has dyspepsia.’

Dubeya had also stopped his car, ahead of them. He started pressing his horn in a repeating two-beat pattern.

‘Why is he doing that?’ asked Joyce, her legs still in the air. ‘It’s not feeding time . . . is it?’

‘He has not put any fresh meat out,’ said Wong, with a gulp. ‘I think . . . maybe we are the fresh meat.’

Three adult lions appeared in the bushes and started to move directly towards the Proton.

‘Oh, why are they coming over here?’ Joyce squealed.

Their muscles rippling under their lean skin, the big cats padded calmly towards the car. They were large and heavy-looking, the stockiest one about 2 metres long. His head seemed huge. One had its tongue, a pink, rough-surfaced thing as long as a child’s arm, lolling out of its mouth.

‘They are coming here. Don’t know why,’ said the geomancer, a tremble in his voice.

The lions stopped, 3 or 4 metres from the car, looking with curiosity at the vehicle’s inhabitants. A large male lion licked its lips, and flicked his head to one side.

‘Oh dear God,’ prayed Joyce.

‘They’ve probably sprinkled our car with some blood or something. Maybe stuck some raw meat in the tyre wells,’ whispered Sinha.

‘Ooooooh, someone do something. Can you get rid of the snake, please? Can you call Tambi?’

‘He’s busy,’ said Wong, squinting at the multi-terrain vehicle ahead. ‘He is making videotape of us.’

There was a slight scraping sound from under Joyce’s seat as the snake moved.

She gave off a thin, high-pitched squeal like a badly tuned television.

‘The snake is moving, looking for something,’ said Sinha. ‘I don’t think it has had its dinner. We really cannot stay in the car. We have to leave. We have to get out. It’s in a bad mood, I can tell. I know snakes.’

‘Maybe I can drive slow-slow and we get out of the jungle?’ suggested Wong.

But looking around, he realised that it might be impossible. Tambi’s large car was blocking the path in front of them. The ground was uneven on both sides of the road, and there was no way to spin the car around without throwing the snake from side to side.

‘Maybe I drive backwards, very carefully,’ said the geomancer.

‘No. Just stay as you are,’ said Sinha. ‘The snake may calm down. At the moment it is moving forwards, very slowly.’

There was silence in the car. One of the lions gave a small roar, more a throat-clearing really. The snake could be heard shuffling slightly.

The young woman, who was breathing in short, sharp bursts like a galloping dog, turned pleading eyes to Wong. She whispered: ‘I really, really don’t like snakes. Do something. Please!’

Wong leaned over to the passenger seat. ‘Joyce. Take your music-thing out of your music machine. Put it in the car player.’

‘What?’ She reached into her handbag and fumbled with the CD player, eventually extracting its contents. She then tried to stretch over with the disc in her hand, but she lost her grip and it tumbled down into the footwell. ‘Ooops.’

‘Careful! You just missed its head,’ snapped Sinha.

‘You have any other disc? Loud one? Bad noise? Screaming, that sort of thing?’ asked Wong.

‘Yeah. Here, take this.’ She pulled another CD out of her bag and snapped its case open.

The geomancer reached over to take the shiny disc. He said to Sinha: ‘This music it makes me uncomfortable. I think it will make the lions *mm-shu-fook* too. But the snake. What will happen?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the astrologer. ‘Snakes don’t have ears, really. Not like ours. But they do feel rhythms. They rather like them, I think. You know, this gives me an idea. Put the music on, Wong, loud as you can. It might scare the lions, but it will probably have a different effect on the snake.’

Wong pushed the disc into the car audio unit and wound the windows of the car down a few inches.

Joyce leaned forwards. 'Erm, track three. Press that button with the arrow on and then press number three. That's a real screamer.'

'Like this?' said Wong.

'Yes. And that's the vol—let me do it.' She reached over with some difficulty, since her legs were still in the air, and slid the volume slider to maximum.

Seconds later, the harsh, jangly crash of a power chord from a rock guitar shook the car. This was followed by an unearthly scream which went on for four seconds. There was a thunderous explosion of drums. Then the other musicians jumped into the fray, and the car throbbed and shook with the sound of pounding drums, shrieking voices and fuzzy, wailing guitars.

'Good, good,' shouted Wong, as he saw the surprised lions suddenly spring away, moving some 25 or 30 metres from the car. 'They don't like it either. Have good taste.'

'Never mind about that. What's the snake under my chair doing?' yelled Joyce, curling her legs tightly to her.

'I think it likes it. It's interested,' shouted Sinha over the sound of the music. 'Unfortunately it is moving towards you. I think there must be a speaker near you.'

'Waaaaaaa,' wailed Joyce as she saw the snake's head for the first time, appearing in her footwell and sliding upwards.

She had her legs in the air, angled to the centre of the car. The snake slowly rose to the other side, heading towards the thudding bass speaker in the door.

'It feels the rhythm,' said Sinha. He suddenly opened his door, stepped out, snapped the radio aerial off the rear car wing, and started waving it in a figure of eight, trying to catch the attention of the snake. 'Wong, lower the window. And tell me if the lions come back,' he shouted.

'You're all right,' hollared Joyce. 'They're miles away.'

Wong lowered the window on the young woman's side.

The dancing aerial eventually attracted the snake's attention. Sinha gradually moved away from Joyce's window, coaxing the snake to follow. Its head followed the movement of the aerial and then it started to move out

of the car through the window. The young woman stopped breathing, frozen in a mixture of joy and terror as the snake's long body wriggled past her.

Wong was gripped so tightly with horror that he could barely breathe. After a long and strained minute, the snake was partly out of the window. The music continued to shake the car.

'Wong. Wait till I get its head higher, then shut the window,' shouted Sinha. 'It has been years since I even saw a snake charmer. I never imagined I would be doing it myself. Come on, baby. Come on, little serpent. That's right. A bit more. A bit more. Keep on coming, that's right. Ha!'

Joyce suddenly stiffened and pointed. The lions had started to move back towards the car.

'Sinha. Lions are coming. You need to come in the car quickly please,' said Wong.

'I understand. Just a second or two more.'

He made pulling motions with the thin metal rod and several more centimetres of the snake flowed out of the window.

The lions were moving faster. Wong knew he couldn't wait any longer. About half of the snake's long body was out of the window. He pressed the 'window up' button. The glass started to slide upwards, its whirring sound masked by the harsh music. As it touched the snake's body, the beast tried to withdraw at high speed back into the car.

Joyce screamed, seeing the cobra withdrawing sharply backwards, visualising it heading right into her lap. But the window continued rising, and caught the snake by a curve of its body behind its head. It struggled, but the glass kept rising, and it failed to get its head back through the gap. As its skull was crushed by the rising glass, its mid-section and tail suddenly started flailing backwards, slapping the young woman across her arms. Joyce shrieked again. Sinha jumped back into the car and slammed his door shut just as the lions reached the car in a few huge leaps.

Sinha grabbed Joyce under the arms. With one sharp tug, he pulled her backwards through the gap between the front seats, away from the wriggling snake until she was sprawling in the back of the car.

The lions peered into the car. At the front window, one of the lions started nosing at the head of the snake, from which dark liquid was dripping down the window.

‘Okay now, okay now,’ said Wong. ‘All safe.’

‘You’re all right now,’ said the old astrologer, squeezing Joyce’s shoulders.

‘Sorry,’ she whimpered. The snake’s body continued to writhe from the top of the window, and then gave a shudder and stopped.

‘There’s nothing to be sorry about,’ said Sinha. ‘You’ve been very brave. I think Wong is more petrified than you are.’

‘*Jun hai*,’ said the geomancer, breathing in short gasps as he turned the car around, nudging the lions out of the way as he had the sheep the previous day. The car lurched over the roadside ruts, and then righted itself, facing back to the entrance. ‘Now we go,’ he yelled. ‘I think we do not wait to collect our fee. I think we have to be satisfied with deposit only.’

‘I agree,’ said the Indian.

The Proton moved back towards the gate, with Tambi’s multi-terrain vehicle following at a distance.

‘A narrow escape,’ said Sinha, still holding the shaken young woman. ‘Now why would he want to do a thing like that? Not very thoughtful. No good for us or him. Surely three more deaths would be the worst possible publicity for his park?’

‘He is not interested in making money from animal park,’ said Wong, turning down the music. ‘He just pretends, I think, so he can take share in this project. He makes lions eat his partners. Solve two problems at once. Gets rid of them. Gives good excuse for not continuing with park. More deaths, even better. He wants to dig up land. Make a mine. Much metal under the ground.’

‘What a bastard.’

Joyce sniffed and started to breathe more steadily.

‘You wanted to see jungle animals closely,’ said Sinha.

‘Yes,’ gasped Joyce, wiping her eyes and trying to smile.

After bumping along in relative silence, the astrologer, who had loosened his fatherly grip on the young woman’s shoulders, looked back. ‘Tambi’s car has stopped. I wonder why?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Wong. ‘Maybe because I took all the petrol out this morning.’

‘You did what?’

‘I use a bit of hose I found in the garage. Just suck it out.’

‘So you siphoned off his gas. I thought your breath smelt a bit alcoholic this morning. How very interesting. How will he and his cousin get out?’

‘Don’t know. They could walk. But maybe not a good idea. Lions not been fed yet.’

The geomancer slowed down the car as a pink butterfly flew in a drunken zig-zag across the road. Then he put his foot back on the accelerator. He turned to face his young assistant. ‘You know, Joyce? Maybe I start to like your music now.’

Wong turned up the volume and the sound of rock music shook the car as they headed for the gates.



## 5 Mysterious properties

*In the third century AD was written the Lieh-tzu. In this book, Yang Chu says: 'There are four things which do not allow people to have peace.*

*'The first is long life, the second is reputation, the third is rank, and the fourth is riches.*

*'Those who have these things fear ghosts, fear men, fear power, and fear punishment.'*

*Blade of Grass, the things you want are the things you do not want.*

*Hear the ancient story of the man who knew what he wanted.*

*He was walking by the riverside when he saw an Immortal. The man was very curious. He looked at the person from Heaven.*

*'I suppose you want something special from me?' said the Immortal.*

*'Yes,' said the man.*

*The Immortal touched a stone with his finger. It changed to gold. He said: 'You can take.'*

*The man did not go. He stayed.*

*'Do you want something more?' said the Immortal.*

*'Yes,' said the man.*

*The Immortal touched three rocks nearby. They turned to gold. He said: 'You can take.'*

*But the man still did not go.*

*The Immortal said: 'What do you want? What is more valuable than gold?'*

*The man said: 'I want something very ordinary.'*

*The Immortal said: 'What do you want?'*

*The man said: 'Your finger.'*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom',

by C F Wong, part 112.

'You have to answer a question for me, Wong-saang,' said Biltong Au-yeung, leaning over the railing of the ferryboat, and shouting over the rushing of the wind and the churning of the engines. 'Why does everyone love the Star Ferry? Why do I love the Star Ferry? It's old, grimy, slow, crowded, out-of-date, and the terminus buildings are cramped and unappealing. Yet there's something almost—almost miraculously refreshing about it. Even in this city where everyone is rushing-rushing-rushing—even worse than Singapore, no?—people will make a special effort to put the Star Ferry into their schedule. Why do we do this?'

'Yeah. It's really kinda magical,' said Joyce.

It was dusk in Hong Kong. The green-and-white boat, shaped like a woodlouse, bobbed gently up and down as it lazily traversed one of the world's busiest waterways. They were only halfway across Victoria Harbour, yet already a dozen boats had crossed their path, some appearing to veer dangerously close.

So transfixing was the 360-degree panorama that Joyce eventually lowered her camera and just leaned on the wrought iron railing, soaking up the scene, and occasionally being showered by the spray. The variety of vessels visible was stunning. There were huge ocean liners, like white skyscrapers lying on their sides; there were freight ships, their decks piled high with multi-coloured cargo-containers, kindergarten bricks for giants; there were lighters topped with cranes, unloading cargo from ocean-going vessels on the edges of the central harbour; there were tiny tugboats, dragging large boats on what seemed to be ridiculously fine bits of string; there were old wooden Chinese junks, their hulls oddly upturned at each end (Joyce noted that they were powered by engines—not a single one had the romantic bat-wing sail that you saw on Hong Kong pictorials); there



were sleek, aerodynamic jetfoils skimming futuristically across the top of the water with the sound of jet aircraft; there were tiny rowing boats, one of which had a figure with a traditional cone-shaped hat leaning over the edge, fishing with a string and a hook, but no rod; and there were the grey marine police boats, looking like water insects with spiky antennae protruding from their bridges, uniformed men standing stiffly at their bows.

‘Not magic,’ said C F Wong. ‘Good feng shui.’

‘Go on, fill us in then, please, C F,’ asked Joyce.

‘The harbour and the Star Ferry are the feng shui centre of Hong Kong. It is not the map centre. It is not the geography centre. But it is the true centre. Hong Kong island, on this side, ten times smaller than Kowloon peninsula on that side. But Hong Kong island has very great ch’i energy. This balances the ch’i energy of Kowloon, also very strong. Look at the mountain. The mountain, the stars, the water—all combine to make ch’i energy flow into a pool on north side of the island.’

Joyce leaned over the lower deck railings and saw, behind them, the Peak, which stood like a huge green wall behind the buildings of the central part of Hong Kong island.

‘The five ch’i elements are all here. Where we stand on this boat,’ the geomancer continued. ‘Water. It is under our feet and all around us. Wood. The boat itself is mostly made of wood. Wooden benches and wooden floors. Metal. The frame of the boat, the engine, the funnel. These are all metal. Fire. There is a fire in the centre of the vessel. Makes it move. Most of the day the boat is in the direct line of the sun. Soil. All around us on both sides of the harbour, are huge pieces of earth. Not just land. Big mountains of earth. Such big amounts of elemental energy can be bad. But here there is balance. It is not perfect. But it is quite good. The balance is quite okay. This is why many people feel strong when they are on the Star Ferry.’

It was dusk and the neon lights of the Hong Kong cityscape were flickering into life around them. The purples, reds and yellows of the neon logos were reflected as long, shimmering streaks in the water. To the west, the last light from the setting sun was captured as a thousand pieces of orange fire on the crests of the waves.

Joyce felt the wind-borne spray cooling her face and she was happy. She no longer felt that the feng shui man’s world was one she could never enter.

She was beginning to realise just how big her own world really could be.

Wong—whether because of the high *ch'i* energy of the location or just because he was in a holiday mood, Joyce did not know—was in an unusually talkative mood. He had bought a book of aerial photographs of the city, and was happily pointing out large-scale feng shui factors visible from on high.

‘Hong Kong island is very good example of *yin* and *yang*, the two basic forms of elemental energy. Hong Kong north part is very *yang*. Noisy, busy, active, crazy, everyone running all the time. Then there is a mountain in the middle. Then Hong Kong south part is very *yin*. Quiet, lots of trees, restful, more homes, less offices. The houses are short, not tall, there are beaches instead of docks, you see, quite different. This is very obvious if you know something about *yin* and *yang*. But more interesting to the feng shui master is the influences of east and west on the island . . .’

‘Beaches? Great. When are we going? I could just do with a couple of days on the beach. Make this the perfect holiday.’ She wondered what Hong Kong guys were like. What was the name of that movie star? Fat somebody?

‘This is not holiday. This is work. Please to remember,’ said Wong.

‘There’s not much work,’ said Joyce. ‘We’re only gonna buy a house. And Bill already knows which one. Won’t take long, will it? Is it big? Does it have a garden?’

Biltong Au-yeung, a bespectacled executive in his late thirties, lowered his well-groomed but somewhat overweight body onto a wooden bench opposite Wong. ‘Let me tell you about buying property. It’s a bit different here than in other countries.’

He explained that nearly all homes were small flats in high-rise buildings. If you wanted a newly built one, you would look at the advertisements in local newspapers to see what developments were being started.

From his bag, he pulled out a folded newspaper and showed them a full-page advertisement from the previous day’s newspaper telling readers that a residential complex in the rural area was to be sold shortly. It showed Dragon’s Gate Court as a complex of tower blocks, with thick foliage draped over every balcony, surrounded by shops and gardens. There were no other developments nearby. Lush rolling hills stretched out on one side,

and a tranquil blue sea dotted with white sailing boats ran to the horizon on the other. It was sort of paradise-for-skyscrapers.

‘What’s the address?’ Joyce asked. ‘It doesn’t give any address. Is it anywhere near the Chim place C F was talking about?’

‘It’s on the edge of Ma On Shan,’ Au-yeung replied. ‘It’s normal in Hong Kong not to bother with addresses, especially in new towns. You just name the area and the building.’

‘Dragon’s Gate Court. Sounds nice,’ the young woman said. ‘Now what? Let’s go and see it. Have you got the keys? Where do we find the estate agent?’

‘It’s very different here. You basically get in a queue and put your name down for a unit. If it’s a very popular development, they do a sort of computerised ballot, and then publish a couple of hundred winners’ names in the newspapers.’

‘You can win the flat? You don’t have to pay?’

‘No, no. You win the right to buy the flat. You still have to pay full price. At the moment, the market is in a bit of a slump, and these units are pretty pricey, even by Hong Kong standards, so the developers reckon a ballot won’t be needed. We just need to go down there tomorrow morning. If you all come to my office by 6.30, that should be enough time. Do you remember how to get there?’

‘Six-thirty? Like in the morning?’ She was shocked, and sat down, suddenly tired.

‘Yes. There will almost definitely be a queue, and the first site bus leaves at 6.45. Bring your passports.’

‘It’s that far away? Like in another country?’

‘No, but it’s high security. Flat sales always are, here. Everyone needs formal identification.’

‘Yikes. Six-thirty. That’s only twelve-and-a-bit hours away,’ said Joyce, looking at her Swatch. ‘And I have at least ten hours’ worth of shopping to do. And can we go and have tea at the Peninsula?’ This question was aimed at Wong.

‘I think we cannot afford it,’ he said.

‘Oh, go on, C F. Daddy will pay you back. Put it on expenses. What about the shopping? Where is this Chim place you were telling me about, where you can get knock-off Prada bags and the shops are open till 4 a.m.?’

‘Tsim Sha Tsui. Just docking there now.’

Wong whispered to Au-yeung: ‘Please excuse my assistant. In *Putonghua*, there is a phrase. She is a bit *p’ei ch’ien huo*. Understand or not?’

The Hong Konger smiled. ‘*Mingbaak*. Waste-money-merchandise.’

With a gentle bump, the Star Ferry nosed up to the side of the jetty on Kowloon-side.



By 8.05 the next morning, Wong, McQuinnie and Au-yeung were in a long and sleepy queue of would-be property buyers which snaked along the outside of a construction site in Ma On Shan, a semi-urban district thirty minutes’ drive from central Hong Kong. The developers had provided free transport from the major urban centres to the on-site showroom where the blocks were to be sold. Au-yeung had explained that this was partly for the sake of convenience, since there was only one access road to the development. But he added that it was probably also because triad elements often tried to infiltrate apartment sales. Each would-be buyer had to provide identification before they were allowed onto the bus.

Subdued by the earliness of the hour and the boredom of the bus ride, most people were initially too somnolent to talk. But as the sun became bright in the sky, a buzz of sleepy conversation started to run down the length of the queue. Wong appeared to be asleep on his feet, his eyes open but unseeing.

There was a little drama soon after Au-yeung and his two feng shui advisers had taken their place in the queue. Two large dark cars pulled up and stopped dramatically in the road in front of the sales office. Some tough-looking men in dark suits emerged and marched towards the front of the queue. They were soon seen arguing with the guards that were planted thickly around the office.

‘Who are they? People pushing in?’ Joyce asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Au-yeung. ‘Possibly triads. They often muscle in to flat sales and try to get the best slots, which they then re-sell for huge profits. I don’t know, though.’

The argument got more heated, and the security guards were seen calling for help on walkie-talkies. More men in uniform arrived and soon physically grabbed the six men and hustled them away. There was much struggling and shouting, and the incident caused the queue of people to become completely silent for several minutes.

The whiff of danger served to wake the young woman up. She noticed that Au-yeung's briefcase was handcuffed to his wrist. 'Jeepers. You must have some pretty important stuff in there.'

'Yes,' the Hong Kong businessman said. 'My lunch. Someone once stole my *cha siu bau* and I am taking precautions to make sure it doesn't happen again.'

'Really?'

'No, not really,' he said with a smile. 'You have to pay deposits on flats like this in Hong Kong in cash. The deposit for this is 1.5 million Hong Kong dollars, which is about 200 000 US dollars.'

'Like, you have 200 000 US dollars in there?' she squeaked.

'No, I have what is called a cashier's order for that sum. It works like cash, but is not quite so heavy. But some people bring actual cash along. Some people in Hong Kong pay the whole bill in cash—not just the deposit but the whole price.'

'Wow. Two hundred thou seems a lot of money for a deposit.'

Wong added: 'Yes, and that only one-tenth of the full price. Even worse than Singapore.' He shook his head.

'Yes,' said Au-yeung with a sigh. 'That's why it's really important to get the right place. So damn expensive. We are going to use this flat as a launching pad for our family. My wife is six months pregnant, so it is really important we get the right place.'

'Birth coming,' said Wong, who took from his pocket a brochure containing a floor plan. 'Need to harness the influence of the east. Must smooth out the darkness of the north. Also fix water element. So baby can grow big and strong.'

The businessman smiled. 'That's it. Anyway, when we get to the front of the queue, we will be shown a plan which will reveal which flats are still available, and you must help me choose. You only get a couple of minutes to decide, which is why I need you with me.'

'This map very bad. Gives room size for each room, but no directions.'

‘Yes. They never give enough information. They just rush you all through, take the money and run.’

‘I think it’s hilarious,’ said Joyce. ‘I mean, look at the picture in the ad. It’s nothing like this.’

Instead of the elegant blocks surrounded by greenery, there was nothing but a large, dusty construction site filled with half-built blocks, some of which were covered in green netting. Nor were the surroundings in the illustration—green fields and blue seas—anything like reality. The development seemed to be circled with other large, dusty construction sites.

‘I can’t see a single tree in any direction,’ said Joyce. ‘In fact, I can’t see any plants at all. And where’s the sea? According to this picture, it’s supposed to be right next to the sea.’

Au-yeung said: ‘This is what they call an artist’s impression. The artists usually use their imagination quite freely.’

‘Rip-off,’ said Joyce.

‘Yes,’ said Au-yeung. ‘It probably is. Now, how are you getting on, Wong Seen-saang?’

‘You are sure it is phase one, that is for sale today, on this page?’

‘I am.’

‘Then you must buy block two or three, not block one. You should go for flat which is on east side, so must choose flat D or flat E. You say you like high floor, so you can choose which floor, does not matter. Block two I think is better than block three, but I need to see proper big map to be sure.’

‘They have big area maps in the main office, when we get to the front of the queue. The upper floors tend to sell out first, so that might not be possible.’

‘If you cannot buy upper floor, I suggest buy floor five. Good feng shui. Fourth floor also good.’

‘Fourth? I thought fourth was always bad luck?’

‘No, only in Hong Kong superstition. In true feng shui, historical feng shui, four is very often a good number.’

‘That may be so, but my family are Hong Kong traditionalists. I don’t think they would let me buy anything on the fourth floor. What about the roads?’

‘Yes. I am considering Big Picture. But difficult with such bad information. There is only one road approaching. This goes northwest. But

travels past gate facing northeast. There is one more road behind. But hard to tell. Not finished building it yet.'

The queue was gradually moving forwards. Just where they were standing, there was a gap in the fence, and Wong poked his head in to see a carpenter, white with sawdust, trimming a plank to fill in the hole. The man shouted something to another worker, and Wong visibly started, recognising a familiar accent.

'Wai. Lei haih Guangzhou-dong-yan, hai-mm-hai-ah?' Wong said.

'Hai, lei-la?' the man replied in a gruff voice.

'Bai Wan ngoh heung-ha,' said the geomancer.

The carpenter smiled. 'Bai Wan ngoh sek. Ngoh sing So. Ngoh dai-lo Bai Wan ju.'

Au-yeung told Joyce: 'They are from the same *heung ha*—that means ancestral town. Wong is from Bai Wan, northeast of Guangzhou city. There are a lot of Guangzhou people in Hong Kong; not so many in Singapore, I think.'

Wong talked animatedly with the carpenter, and eventually stepped in through the hole in the fence and continued to fire questions at him.

The queue moved slowly forwards and Au-yeung and McQuinnie were carried along, losing sight of the feng shui master. 'Will he be all right?' asked Joyce.

'Sure. He'll fit right in. I mean . . .' Au-yeung paused and gave a guilty grin. 'I don't mean to be rude or anything, but an oldish, craggy fellow in rumpled clothes, and, and, speaking with a strong Guangdong accent—he's just like most of the illegal immigrant types they have working on construction sites in Hong Kong. He'll fit in just fine. Also, he'll be able to have a good look round. He might find out something useful to us. As long as he doesn't get arrested or anything.'

The Hong Kong businessman opened a thermos of hot water and a pot of instant noodles. He offered to share his breakfast with her. The early start had given Joyce a queasy stomach and she decided she couldn't eat anything. Au-yeung munched through the noodles, and then started making phone calls on his cell phone. He seemed to have an endless list of people to speak to.

Joyce stood, bored. She wished she had brought something to read. Biltong's newspaper was all in Chinese, and seemed to be full of pictures of

accidents and ambulances. She passed the time by examining the other people in the queue and trying to guess what they did. Directly behind them was a tall, shaven-headed man who kept trying to sneak in front of them, edging forwards around the sides of the queue. She caught him leering at her, his tiny eyes running over her body. He must have some villainous occupation, she decided—running a shop selling pirate VCDs, maybe.

She stood her ground to prevent him moving forwards, and was shocked when he continued to move forwards until he was actually touching her. She crossly changed places with Au-yeung.

In front of them were two women, bespectacled, smartly dressed, each with identical hairstyles. They were wearing expensive-looking designer suits, which seemed a ludicrous idea on this dusty construction site. Accountants, she decided, buying property as an investment.

‘How long will we have to wait?’ she asked when they had been standing in the slow-moving queue for almost an hour.

‘Probably another hour or so. Let me find out.’ There were several slick-looking young men in dark glasses who regularly strolled up and down the length of the queue. Au-yeung stopped one of them and spoke briefly to him in Cantonese, and then turned back to Joyce.

‘He reckons another forty minutes.’

‘Who are these young guys? The one on the left is kinda cute, I mean, if you like that sort of thing.’ She smiled, slightly embarrassed by her own comment.

‘They are people hired by the developers to help with organisation and security. You always get a few of these “aides”. I mean, if you want my honest opinion, I would say that they are almost definitely a rival group of triads themselves. But they have some link with the developer and are helping to make sure things go smoothly.’

‘Why are they walking up and down?’

‘They are just imparting information to the crowd. For instance, this guy just told me that the eight penthouse flats on both blocks have already gone. Most of the upper floors have gone, he says. There’s a twelfth-floor flat facing northeast still available. That might do us, but if that goes as well, I don’t mind lower floors. The fifth floor facing east, like Wong suggested, would be fine. Probably not too many people after them, either, so we’ve got a chance of getting one, I hope.’



After another twenty minutes passed uneventfully, Auyeung and his companion found themselves twelve places from the door to the main office. 'Won't be long now,' the businessman said. 'I wonder where Wong is?' He was starting to become anxious, and kept turning around to see if the old geomancer was anywhere in sight.

The young men in dark glasses were standing to one side, counting the people from the door, and then moving along the queue, chatting to each buyer. This time, the conversations were more animated, and the buyers in front of them seemed to be pleased by what they heard.

Joyce watched while the young men spoke to the two be-suited women in front of them, and then swapped a few words with Bilton Au-yeung. The businessman smiled broadly.

The one that Joyce decided was attractive took off his wrap-around petrol-coloured sunglasses and caught her eye. He grinned, showing an old woman's gold tooth unexpectedly placed in a young mouth. 'Hello? Spik Chinese?' he said.

'No, sorry. Do you speak English?' She gave him her just-slightly-interested smile.

'No.' He turned to Biltong and asked him something in Cantonese.

The businessman replied in the same language, and the young man instantly lost his smile, replaced his glasses and walked on.

Au-yeung turned to Joyce. 'He was asking whether you were my girlfriend, although he didn't use that word. I told him you were my second sister-in-law and you were due to marry an extremely wealthy businessman in the interior decoration industry next week.'

'Why d'you say that? Did he like me? You didn't have to put him off. He was kinda cute.'

'Yes, but, believe me, I did you a favour. You wouldn't want to get involved with someone like that.'

Joyce shrugged her shoulders. 'Dunno. Whatever. I've always wanted to be a gangster's moll. Guess it wouldn't have been very romantic if we like, couldn't speak to each other. Wish you hadn't said I was marrying an interior decorator though. What a poncy job.'

'Pon-si?'

'I mean, it's all gay men, mainly. Decorators. Gay people are cool but you can't marry them.'

‘Ah. Well it’s different here. Certain jobs here are closely associated with the triads. Interior decoration is one of them. It’s a real tough-guy job in Hong Kong. I was basically telling him that you belonged to someone more powerful in his own line of work.’

Joyce thought about this for a moment. ‘Interior decorators are tough guys in Hong Kong? You’re having me on.’

‘No.’

She shook her head. ‘Too weird. So I guess I am a gangster’s moll in his eyes. Cool. Why did they stop and talk to you, anyway?’

‘They said there are twenty more flats left in block two, eight of which are on the fourth floor—fourth is always the last to sell in Hong Kong. If you calculate the number of people ahead of us, we look like being the last people to be able to buy a block-two flat which isn’t on the fourth floor. Apparently both the flats Wong picked out are still available: E and D on the fifth. Fifth floor isn’t very popular. It’s too low, and too close to the unlucky fourth. We’re in luck. Thank goodness we took the earliest bus.’

The shaven-headed man behind them groaned with disappointment after talking to the same young men.

‘He’s upset,’ Au-yeung translated, needlessly. ‘He’ll probably have to have something on the fourth, or go for the next block.’

‘I don’t feel sorry for him,’ said Joyce. ‘He’s been trying to push in and get in front of us ever since we got here. He’s got wandering eyes too. Wonder where C F is?’

They had to wait another ten minutes before Wong returned, arguing his way back to his companions with some difficulty. ‘Hard to get back,’ the geomancer said. ‘Thought I was trying to get in front. Went back to building site. Borrowed hard hat. Then I can walk anywhere.’

‘Pushing in is a capital offence in this sort of situation,’ said the businessman. ‘The British left an awful lot of good things, and a few bad ones, but the habit of orderly queuing is one of the best. Did you find out anything interesting?’

‘Yes,’ said Wong. ‘Very many things. Important things.’

He took out the brochure and opened it to the floor plan. ‘One. This plan is a bit wrong. A lot wrong. South should be here, not here.’

‘Oh dear. Does this change your recommendation?’

‘Yes. Very much change.’

Au-yeung, suddenly worried, leaned over to look at the map. 'You better tell me fast, Wong. We're nearly at the front of the queue. We've only got a few minutes before we have to decide.'

'But listen first. There are some other strange things I found out too,' said the old man. 'The main gate, the entrance, when it is finished, will be here. Will face northeast. Big ornamental gate very nice. Back gate will be southeast.'

'We knew that, though, didn't we?' said the businessman.

'We knew the gate was here. But we did not know the direction. This means the name is wrong. But So told me that the feng shui master for this development was Pang Si-jek.'

'Wait a minute. Who's So?' asked Joyce.

'The workman. His brother lives in my village. But listen. Pang Si-jek was the feng shui master for this development, he says. I know him very well, before. He usually does not make mistakes with names.'

'What's wrong with the name?'

'Northeast, the name should be Tiger. Tiger's Gate Court, if it is an animal. If it is not a star animal, then any name is okay. But cannot use astrology animal and use wrong one. Dragon's Gate Court is a southeast name. Where back gate is.'

'Probably just carelessness,' said Au-yeung. 'I'm sure there's nothing to be worried about.'

'But Pang never makes such mistakes. Listen please. New foreman and new bosses and new workers arrived yesterday, he told me. To make place ready for sale today. So said there is something wrong. Usual foreman did not come to work. The workers, they call it Ma On Shan lot 2761. But they thought it was going to be named Blossom Garden. Until yesterday. The new foreman ordered the new name, Dragon's Gate Court, to be put up last night. These signs, all new.'

'That does sound a bit odd.' The cheek muscle under Au-yeung's left eye gave a worried twitch.

'There's something like weird going on here, right?' said Joyce.

'Have more news,' said the geomancer. 'The people you said were triads. Those men who came early, had argument. I found them. They were locked up in a how-you-say? Metal room? Portable room? Portaloo?'

'Portacabin,' said Joyce.

‘Yes. Portacabin on west side. I pretend to be worker. Got close. Speak to them through the window. I think they are not triads. They are too old, some of them. I think they are real owners. Bad men took their mobile phones.’

‘Real owners? What? What do you mean? What’s going on here? This is all too strange for me.’ Au-yeung got out his mobile phone, although there was no one obvious for him to call. It just seemed to be a nervous reaction. He started to put his phone away, and then got it out again. ‘*Mutyeh si?* What’s happening? You’ve got me really confused, Wong.’

Joyce was trying to work it out. ‘You mean, like, these bad guys turn up last night and take over the site and give it a new name and try and sell it and stuff? But you can’t sell someone else’s building. I mean, didn’t the real owners object? They must have seen the ad.’

‘Usually they do not put addresses on the ad. Also the what-you-call-it? Artist impression? All artist impression look the same, I think.’

Au-yeung gasped: ‘What’s the idea here?’

‘They just want the deposit I think,’ said Wong. ‘How many people here? Much cash deposit.’

Au-yeung tried to speak but his voice was just a croak. His throat suddenly felt constricted. He coughed. ‘Erm. *Ngoh mm ji*. I don’t know. About 500, I reckon.’

‘The deposit is how much?’

‘One-point-five million Hong Kong dollars,’ said the businessman. ‘Five hundred times 1.5 million is, about, 750 million Hong Kong dollars.’

‘Wow,’ said Joyce. ‘That’s probably like a lot of money even in real money.’

‘One hundred million US dollar almost,’ said the geomancer.

‘Pretty good for one night’s work.’

‘Very good for one night’s work.’ Au-yeung was breathing deeply and quickly, like an asthmatic. He checked the handcuff holding his briefcase to his hand, and then hugged the bag to his chest. He was sweating. ‘We have to escape.’

By this time, the queue had moved on again and they were standing at the door of the main office. They saw a desk, surrounded by guards and men in dark suits.

‘Heavies,’ murmured Joyce. ‘Like in the movies.’

A man at a desk was greeting a buyer, taking a cheque from him, and ushering him to the next desk, where he was shown a map, a list of apartments, and handed some papers to sign.

Au-yeung, looking over the heads of the women in front, kept his terrified eyes firmly on the progress of the man's cheque. It was slipped into an envelope and then taken to a third desk, where a man put it into a metal security box—a container that held a large stack of similar cheques, plus some thick wads of cash.

Wong was talking to the large shaven-headed man in the queue behind them.

'I can see what's happening,' Au-yeung said to Joyce. 'Look, they're collecting all the cash and cashiers' cheques in that box, and they'll make a break for it before someone realises that they are selling someone else's unfinished property development. What a scam. We have to get away.'

'Will they let us leave? Do you think they'll have guns?' whispered Joyce, suddenly noticing the large number of unsmiling guards and staff representatives around the showroom.

'Wong,' said Au-yeung, grabbing the old man's arm. 'What do we do?'

'We just go,' said the geomancer, starting to move away. 'I told man behind us the apartment we want already sold. We don't want other ones because of feng shui not good for your birth chart.'

The man behind was gleeful to see Wong, McQuinnie and Au-yeung step out of the queue, and he hurriedly closed up the gap, standing unsociably close to the young women who had been ahead of them.

The slick young man who had spoken to Joyce earlier approached the three as soon as they stepped away from the queue. '*Wai. Mut-yeh si?*'

'*Ngoh-ge chaang maih-jo,*' said Wong, with a pained expression on his face. '*Di-yi-di chaang fung shui mm-ho, ngoh lum. Mo baanfaat.*'

'Mo ban fat,' repeated Joyce, trying to look tough, as befits an experienced moll.

With a dismissive toss of his head, the young triad let them leave, and the three climbed into a waiting taxi to head back to the urban area.

'Phew. Thank God we are out of there. What do we do now?' asked Joyce, as the vehicle slipped onto the main road. 'This is a major scam. Shouldn't we like report it to the police or something?'

'Already did,' said Wong. 'Used a phone on site. Before I came back.'

As they proceeded towards Shatin, three squad cars raced past the taxi, and turned, tyres squealing in the best Hollywood tradition, into the approach road that led to the site.

‘Do you think they will catch them?’ asked Joyce. ‘Won’t they try and escape round the back or something?’

‘Yes,’ said Wong. ‘I think they will try that. They will take the money box. They will use the road that goes to the southeast in the direction of the dragon. I told the police to put a road block there. So I think it is no problem.’

Au-yeung remained sitting frozen with his briefcase in his arms, stunned by the turn of events. ‘I almost lost you, my poor baby,’ he cooed to his savings.

‘Does this mean you are not going to buy a flat after all and we can go on holiday now?’ asked Joyce.

Au-yeung, in shock, did not answer.

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Wong. ‘I think he will not let go of that bag. For a long time.’

‘Can we like, go to the beach or something now?’

‘Yes. But first, I think we go and have breakfast in the Peninsula hotel.’

‘I thought we couldn’t afford it.’

‘I sold our place in the queue to man behind us,’ said the geomancer. ‘He gave me 3000 Hong Kong dollars. I think it is enough.’

The taxi picked up speed as they topped a hill and row after row of glittering towers beckoned them.



## ⑥ Ghost in the machine

*The sages of ancient days tell this story. There was a poor Taoist priest. He walked on the paths between the mountains. He lived on air and on river water and on what he was given.*

*One day he came to the village pear-seller. The village pear-seller had more than one hundred pears in his barrow.*

*‘Give me one please,’ said the priest.*

*‘No. You must pay like other people,’ said the pear-seller. ‘Go away.’*

*But the priest did not leave.*

*The man became angry. The people standing near said: ‘Give him a small one. Or a bad one. Then he will go.’*

*The pear-seller said: ‘No.’*

*Now a crowd had gathered.*

*The chief of the village came. He paid for a pear. He gave it to the poor priest. The priest said thank you. He said: ‘People like me give up everything. We give up life, family, money, homes, possessions. We cannot understand the minds of those who give up nothing.’*

*The people asked the priest: ‘Yes, you give up much. But what do you get?’*

*The priest said: ‘Many things. For example, I have many beautiful pear trees, each with hundreds of delicious pears.’*

*The people asked: ‘Where are they?’*

*The priest said: 'In here.' He pointed to the pear in his hand. Then he ate the pear. He took out the pips. He buried them in the ground. He asked for some water. He sprinkled the water on the ground. A stick came out of the ground. Then it became a tree. Then leaves came on the branches. Then pears came out of the branches.*

*'Take. Eat,' said the priest. The people took and ate the pears. The priest said goodbye and left the village.*

*The tree faded. It disappeared. The pear-seller looked back at his barrow. But all his pears had gone.*

*So, Blade of Grass, remember that he who is wealthy in riches is often poor in spirit. He who is poor in wealth is often rich in spirit.*

*From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'*

*by C F Wong, part 116.*

'Ah, my prayers have been answered: a meeting of the mystics on a Friday night. We haven't had a Friday-night meeting for a very, very long time.' Madam Xu Chung Li radiated glee at her companions before taking a small towel out of her handbag and wiping the table, employing particular vigour on the areas directly in front of her and the other female present. These efforts had no visible effect on the table surface, but her observers assumed the gesture was symbolic.

'Why d'you like meeting on Fridays?' asked Joyce.

'Well, dear, Friday is a very special night at the Sambar,' the old fortune teller whispered confidentially, pursing her crimson lips to create a network of lines pointing the way into her mouth. 'It's the night old Uberoi makes string hoppers. Only place in Singapore where you can get them, to my knowledge.'

'Oh.' The young woman decided against asking what a string hopper was, not wanting to appear a tourist.

It was a comparatively cool evening at the open-fronted restaurant where they sat on Serangoon Road, after a day of wind and rain. A week of heavy, humid, oppressive weather had turned the population into slugs, and the sudden cloudburst of the mid-morning had brought welcome relief. It had rained intermittently all day, but had conveniently stopped at 6.30 p.m.,



allowing a northeast zephyr to blow the open-air seats and tables at the restaurant dry just in time for the 8 p.m. meeting of the Investigative Advisory Committee of the Singapore Union of Industrial Mystics.

Joyce had arrived early to make the most of her first visit to Singapore's Little India. She had stopped at the Temple of 1000 Lights, and then spent a happy hour perusing the shops on Serangoon Road. She bought some Punjabi clothes, a movie poster showing overweight actors from Madras, some Tamil music tapes and a whole bag full of Indian brass jewellery. Her shopping bags had soon become heavy, and she was glad when the time came to slide them under the table at the Sambar Coffee House.

She watched Madam Xu expend a great deal of energy rubbing at a dark circle on the table, and wondered whether she should tell her that it was a knot in the wood, not removable by anything less than a power saw.

The elderly fortune teller eventually gave up by herself. She foraged further in her handbag—a large, burgundy leather sack with gold clasps—and pulled out another towel, a small, flowered flannel, scented with patchouli. She delicately touched her forehead and upper lip with it. The evening was becoming balmy, and warm air was flowing out of the kitchen door, which was propped open. The smell of fried cumin pervaded the street.

Someone flicked a switch and a fan started to whirl lazily on the ceiling above them, sending down fluttering waves of tepid air. Joyce felt as if someone was gently stroking the top of her head.

'*Ng, chat, saam, yee, lok, sei, baat.*' C F Wong mumbled to himself as he sat on the edge of the table, filling in numbers on a chart he had brought with him. '*Yat gau-gau gau.*'

Madam Xu tutted unhappily. 'You have a lot of work? Can't even take a break on a Friday night, C F, when string hoppers are on the menu?'

'Yes, *Xu-tai*, have much work today.' The old man's hand seemed to vibrate as he drew tiny Chinese characters over a floor plan.

The fortune teller turned back to the geomancer's young assistant. 'While we're waiting for the Super, shall I just read your palm, my dear?'

'Er. Yeah. Whatever. I, like—' said Joyce, nervously dropping her hands into her lap. Then she looked into the distance and broke into an involuntary smile. 'There's not enough time. Look, he's here.'

Superintendent Tan approached in his usual languid manner, with a sloping gait and his hands buried in his pockets, as if he alone were the counterbalance to the famed uprightness and stiffness of other aspects of the city-state's of ficialdom. He stood at the corner of the table. 'Hello, old friends, very nice it is to see you. Thank you very much for coming, Madam Xu, C F, and, er, Miss Mak—er . . .'

'Jo,' she reminded him.

'Jo, right. We met last time.'

'Our pleasure to come,' said Madam Xu. 'Especially on a Friday night.'

Wong lowered his pen and gathered up his papers, his long fingernails scratch-scratch-scratching at the table like a cat sharpening its claws.

'But where is D K?' asked the young Singaporean police officer. 'Not here yet? He's coming late, is it?'

'Not coming tonight. Sends his apology,' the geomancer put in. 'Has been tied up.'

'Sit, sit,' said Madam Xu.

'No, first, I have something to ask you, you see. Officially, according to the rules, there are no visitors allowed to these meetings, right? But C F, you brought your assistant with you last time and this. I want to ask tonight if I can bring someone too. Can or not? You don't mind, is it?'

'Well, it depends,' said Madam Xu, automatically checking how her *cheong-saam* (black velvet, flecked with purple, blue and pink) sat, at the thought of a guest approaching. Her clothing, of course, was immaculate. 'If it is someone as charming as Ms Jo, I can see no objection.'

'It is a bank manager. Well, private banker, really, I should say. He is involved with the case you will help with tonight, you see.'

'A bank robbery?' asked Wong.

'No, it is a case of . . . actually, I am not sure what it is a case of. The bankers are calling it mass hysteria. I think you have not had a case of mass hysteria before, is it? I can bring him now, okay or not?'

'A private banking gentleman? I think you may,' said Madam Xu, and Wong nodded his assent.

Tan turned and gestured at a man in his early thirties, who stood awkwardly watching them from a distance. Tall and pale-skinned with sandy hair, he approached briskly, coming to a sudden halt behind the police officer.

‘I will do the introductions. This is Joseph Sturmer of United World Banking Corporation. Madam Xu, Ms Joyce, Mr C F Wong. Right, now sit, please.’

The lanky banker, looking out of place in his dark suit and conservative tie, perched unhappily on a chair with his hands on his lap and looked dolefully around. He was as freckled as a child. Joyce looked at him carefully. Nice floppiness to the hair, okay roman nose, but unpleasantly thin lips and no chin at all. Anyway too old, she decided.

Madam Xu explained that she had already discussed the evening’s menu with old Uberoi, so the men may as well just get on with their story. ‘We can eat and listen at the same time.’

‘We shall get on with it then,’ said Tan. ‘This is a story of a bank robbery, as you said. Or perhaps not. What would you say, Mr Sturmer?’

‘Well, it’s a mystery, isn’t it? That’s why we’re here, right? The guys in the bink can’t work it out, inniwhy.’

Joyce noticed the broad accent. ‘Hi. I’m Jo. You from Down Under?’

‘Austriylian? Me? No, mite. From New Zeyland.’

Uberoi’s wife, a huge woman named Nina Chug (Uberoi himself was supermodel-thin) arrived with drinks: salt lassi for Madam Xu, Wong and Tan, and sweet for the two *mat sellah*. All Westerners, it is assumed, prefer sweet.

The silence which followed was broken by Tan. ‘Ah. How shall we start? Someone has robbed the bank in a funny way.’

‘We think, maybe,’ added Sturmer, unhappily.

The geomancer said: ‘Why not Mr Sturmer just tells us?’

‘Yeh, okae,’ said the New Zealander. ‘All this is totally confidential, right? Not to go further than these four . . .’ He noticed that the restaurant only had three walls. ‘It’s confidential, inniwhy. I’m the diputy exicutive minager of the private binking division of United World Bink. Now I received a call from a customer this morning clyming that a deposit had not been processed. We often get this type of complynt. Nine times out of tin, it’s some sort of perfectly normal da-lie.’

‘Da-lie?’ asked Wong.

‘Delay,’ said Joyce. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll translate. My sister went out with a Kiwi once.’

Sturmer continued, a little warily: 'I gaive the usual excuse: "I'm sorry Mr Somchai," I say. "It takes up to seven working dies to clear a cheque, depending on which bink the money is drawn from, and up to twenty-eight days in the case of a foreign currency cheque." It does, you see. But this customer, Mr Somchai, is not satisfied. "This was cash," he says. "I put cash in. It should have been cleared immediately. You don't have to clear cash, it's just cash." He had a good pint there. Now this calls for a different line. "Probably jist some miscalculation somewheres," I tell him. "I'm sure it's not a problim. I think if you just wite for your bink statement, you'll find that it's all there," I say. You see, sometimes customers, they put money in, and a cheque arrives for a similar amount the same die, so that the customer thinks that his bink account total has not gone up, when really everything is fine. Or perhaps his wife withdraws an amount which she forgits to tell him about. Hippens all the time. I tell Mr Somchai that I could send him an interim stitemint, for which we could whyve the processing charge.'

Joyce noticed that C F Wong was watching and listening with intense concentration, struggling to understand the man's accent. For some reason, the bank manager focused on Joyce, and related the story entirely to her. She was first nonplussed, and then pleased, and made sympathetic nodding movements as he spoke. She wondered if the others would be annoyed, since she was the only non-mystic among them.

'Inniwhy, the guy turns mean. "Mr Sturmer," he says. "I am not a fool. I have no wife. I know exictly what goes in and what comes out of my account. I bilince my chequebook every time I use it. What I know is that I deposited five thousand Sing dollars in my current account two dies ago and it is not there now.'"

Sturmer, now getting into his story, became more relaxed, and looked briefly at Wong and Madam Xu before returning his gaze to Joyce. He started using his hands for emphasis. 'So I do the stroke-stroke thing and tell him that I know he is good with figures and I tell him I will personally look into the matter right awhy. Where did he deposit it? Head office? Fourth machine on the right? Right. Thank you for calling. I tell him I will call back within two business hours, which is standard procedure for private binking clients. Okay so far?'

He paused and Joyce and Madam Xu nodded. Wong continued to stare.

‘Right. Now at this stige, I am still largely disregarding the problim. Ninety-nine per cent of cases like this, it is the customer having miscounted something. You would be amized the number of billionaires who just can’t count from one to tin or do simple arithmetic. But then my colleague, Sarah Remangan, who sits one desk away from me, she looks over. “I’ve had the same call from one of my accounts,” she says. “Put her money in last Tuesday. Got a receipt and everything. But she swears the money isn’t there now and never got there. Even ordered a stitement which bicks her up, so she says.”’

The banker paused as a waiter gently elbowed him to one side and placed plates in front of each of them. A platter containing five *masala dosas* followed almost immediately.

‘Go on,’ said Madam Xu, starting to distribute the potato curry pancakes, serving the banker first. ‘That is when you realised something was wrong.’

‘No, not really, not then,’ said Sturmer. ‘You see, the whole system is computerised. It can’t be wrong. It’s always that people spend too much and don’t know where the money’s gone at the end of the day. Human naecture. Then Sarah’s phone rings agin, and it was inother of her clients, with the sime problim. I could tell, just by listening to her half of the conversaiton. It was probably then that I was getting a little worried. Three similar complyints, one after another. Something might just possibly be wrong.’

‘A bug in the computer?’ asked Joyce.

‘No way. You see, bink computers are set up so that they can only do one of two things: They either get it right, or they freeze. There’s no in-between. They cannot do their sums wrong. If they are working, then they are working right. All binking computer systems are based on this principle, as far as I know. Inniwhy, I called several people. I phoned my supervisor, of course, who told me to give all detiles urgently to the bink technology departmint and security departmint. This was about ten o’clock this morning.’

He ran his hands backwards through his hair. ‘Over the nixt, well, couple of hours I giss, there were several similar complyints from customers. A high-level security team was empowered to invistiguyte. By lunch time they gaive their initial findings. All checks of the bink computer showed no problim at all. No hint of a malfunction.’

The banker paused, his mystification showing in his face. 'It was bizarre. It was like a mass hallucination. According to all our records, none of these cash deposits was ever put into the bank, and all the computers were behaving perfectly, according to all diagnostic checks. It was a complete mystery.'

'Could it have been a mass hallucination, like you say?' asked Madam Xu. 'Perhaps . . . deliberate?'

'That's the answer the bank would like,' said Sturmer, turning to her. 'But between you and me, no. None of these people know each other. And there's too many of them to be in on a scam together. Some are really old customers, been banking there for years. One of the people complaining is the niece of one of the directors.'

He paused again, as Mrs Chug arrived with plates of *idli* and *uttapam*. Madam Xu reminded her about the hoppers.

'Don't you have like, security cameras and things?' asked Joyce.

'We do. That was the next stage of the investigation. We worked out that all customers who lost money put it, in cash, into automatic teller machines in the head office's 24-hour banking hall. There are security cameras in the doorway there, which take photos every five seconds.'

'Cameras,' translated Joyce.

The banker continued: 'The videotapes confirmed that the customers who complained had entered the hall and used the machines, just like they said.'

'Tell us about the room, please,' said Wong.

'Well, it's a big room, squarish, on the north side of the building. The investigative team checked the bank machines themselves. There are three on each side of the hall, built into the walls on the east and west side, and another six stand-alone machines at the back of the hall, with two more or less opposite the front door and two on each side. All the machines were working perfectly. They were genuine machines, connected properly to the bank by their normal cables. Nothing appeared to have been tampered with. The security videos showed UWBC technicians entering the premises several times during that two-week period. Four cases involved adjustments of the wall-mounted machines. Two involved teams delivering and installing stand-alone machines, and one involved a team removing a

malfunctioning stand-alone machine. Then there were visits twice a day by cleaning staff. Everything seemed striteforward.'

Mrs Chug arrived with a large plate of *aloo gobi*, which Madam Xu took from her hands and started dispensing to each of the diners, the banker first, then the other men, then Joyce.

'That's it, really,' said Sturmer, his brow furrowed like a cassava field. 'That's all we know. People put the money in, or they imagined they did, and the stuff just vinished. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of Sing dollars, perhaps a million or more. We just don't know. We don't know when the complaints will stop coming.'

'Did you count the machines?' asked Joyce. 'Sorry was that a silly question?'

'All the machines were real and all ours. And nothing wrong with any of them.'

'Now you stop talking and eat,' said Madam Xu to Sturmer. She had apparently decided that she would mother the unhappy banker. 'The time now is for eating and for thinking. Here.' She picked up a plate of pakora and thrust it towards him.

'Thenks, but I don't really feel like . . .'

'Eat. Will revitalise the brain and help you to solve the problem. Must eat.'

He helped himself to a tiny sample and the other diners were also suddenly active, serving each other and themselves.

Joyce felt sorry for the New Zealander, who had the deflated look of someone who has thrown away a winning lottery ticket.

'Have some of this,' she said, spooning a generous portion of lime pickle onto his plate. 'This'll give you a buzz. Must have been a horrible shock.'

'Yes. Especially since the ginerall manager has put me in charge of sorting the problim out. The awful thing is that we have no idea how big the problim is. We are worried that many people will not know they are victims until their bink stitemint arrives at the end of the month.'

'Clues,' said Madam Xu. 'You must have some clues, Superintendent Tan?'

The police officer, greedily heaping his plate into a Himalayan range, carefully lowered his spoon and lifted his briefcase onto his lap. 'Maybe. There were lots of interesting little points on the initial witness statements

we gathered this afternoon. I've got them here. They will be too long for you all to read, but I did note down the major discrepancies. Here.'

He pulled out a yellow sheet of police jotting paper covered with his spidery handwriting, and started trying to decipher it. 'Aaaah, two customers said they came in on Monday afternoon, when in fact the security cameras show they came in at other times, one on Monday before lunch and the other on Tuesday afternoon. Both are old people aged fifty-over, so this might just be absentmindedness, you know how oldsters are? No offence to you, Madam Xu and Mr Wong, I hope, is it?'

He looked at his notes again. 'Ah, most, in fact, nearly all the victims said they had used one of the stand-alone machines on the right-hand side. Two thought they used a machine on the left, and three could not remember clearly which machine they had used. Several had said they used "the deposit machine", although there is no such thing, since all the machines, except the balance reader, offer withdrawal and deposit service.'

Tan squinted down at his notes and then held them at an angle to try and read something he had written sideways. 'Let me see. Ahhh, yes. One guy claimed to have withdrawn a lot of money, changed his mind, and then queued up to deposit most of it back. He is sure he put it back, but only the withdrawal appears on his bank statement, not the deposit. He couldn't remember which machine or machines he used, but says he usually uses one of the wall machines.'

'You have not given enough information about the hall,' said Wong, through a mouthful of *masala dosa*.

'I knew you would want that, C F. Here. I brought a floor plan for you. You love floor plans, correct? The 24-hour banking hall is slightly narrower at the back than the front. The doors are at the east of the building, but they open facing south, being double doors on a small extension. Two complainers we took to the banking hall this afternoon pointed to this machine here as the one which took their money.'

'The one to the east,' said Wong.

'Correct, C F.'

Sturmer sighed at the food on his plate, apparently too crestfallen to have any appetite at all. He looked around at the mystics, all of whom seemed fully occupied with what was on their plates. 'Well. That's it, really. Can



innyone help? Otherwise I'll bugger off. I've got no time to stop and eat, really. Like I sigh, I'm in charge of sorting this mess out.'

'Obviously, someone pushed in a fake machine,' said Madam Xu. 'I guess they donned overalls with the United World Bank logo on the side and pushed their own machine into the corner. You must check those workers in your video tapes pushing machines in and out. If you like, I'll have a look at the videos and see if I can identify the bad guys by paranormal means.'

The banker frowned: 'We did think of that—I mean, that there was a fake machine—and our guys have been sent to track down all the technical staff working for the past two weeks. It'll take a while. One possible mistake we made is that the two security guards don't cover the whole room. We focused on the front doors, rather than the back of the room.'

Joyce asked: 'Why did you not have cameras on the people using the machines?'

'We do, in a sense. Each machine photographs each person who uses it from close range. Don't ever pick your nose while getting money out of a cash machine, Miss. Not that I'm suggesting you would do such a thing. Naturally, there are several thousands of shots of people to look at over a period of a week. We've got people going through these, but no one has noticed anything strange yet.'

They were all starting to be infected by the banker's misery, and for a minute there was silence—if such a term can be used for any meeting in a restaurant on Serangoon Road on a busy Friday night. The banker said: 'Like you, we wondered if someone put in a fake machine. But it would be difficult to install and incredibly audacious.'

The old woman nodded. 'I agree. It would be risky. The chance of the villains losing their takings and their expensive machinery would be very high.'

The Superintendent speared a pakora and concurred. 'And surely it would be complicated and expensive to make a big machine like that just for what may be a small bit of money? I mean, I don't know about you, but I never put money into those machines. I just take it out, right or not?'

'Quite,' nodded Madam Xu. 'I have never put money into a bank machine in my life. I have only withdrawn it, and only when my little Amy

is there to remind me about the secret number and to tell me what buttons to press.'

The police officer leaned back in his chair. He grimaced and sucked his teeth noisily before speaking. 'Could it be that someone—perhaps a rival bank—got hold of a real ATM and re-programmed it in some way, before installing it at United World Bank? You'd need a top-level expert in computers and banking and what-not. There must be a limited number of such fellows.'

'Must be,' agreed Madam Xu. 'Must be some hi-tech crime people.'

'Rubbish.'

They all looked around. The scornful comment had come from Joyce McQuinnie.

'You wouldn't need an expert at all,' she said. 'Any jerk with a bit of programming knowledge could do it. I could do it and I only got a B minus minus in computer studies.'

'Continue, please,' said Tan.

'Like, you wouldn't need any fancy equipment. Just a fastish PC,' the young woman said. 'Let's see, I reckon my brother's 166 megahertz PC clone would do the trick. You would just program the thing to give you a basic flat desktop display with some instructions that told you to like, slip money into a slot and write down what you were depositing, and you would need a built-in printer. So like when you press "enter", the printer would simply like churn out a deposit slip-thing with the information you've just input. Out it would come. A piece of cake.'

'A piece of cake would come out?' asked Wong.

'No, not a piece of cake. A piece of paper.'

'Then why you say cake?'

'It's just, well, it's just what you say. I meant paper,' Joyce snapped.

'What about the other details?' asked Madam Xu. 'You see, deposit slips also have the time and date of transaction and so on.'

'The date and time would be added automatically. Lots of computers do that anyway, on things you print out. Easy.'

The banker nodded. 'The kid's right, you know. If it was just a screen which asked you how much you were depositing, instid of a full ATM service, it could be replicated quite easily on a basic PC. A teenager could do it.'

‘Well thank you, Joyce,’ said the Superintendent. ‘That’s very helpful. Wish I understood this stuff. I’ve got a nephew who’s good at computers. Seems to be young people who can do it, only. Anyway, so fixing a computer to print out a receipt is not too difficult. So what now?’

‘Your earlier point still hasn’t been answered,’ said the fortune teller. ‘Was it worth it? Do people put money into these things? Mr Sturmer. You must know the answer.’

‘That’s a good pint, ma’am,’ the banker said. ‘You’re right. Most people use automatic cash machines to take money out of banks. It’s only a comparatively small percentage which uses them to put money in. In our hall, on single-transaction visits, it’s something like sixty-eight per cent withdrawals, eleven per cent deposits and the remaining twenty-one per cent transfers, account balances or other services.’

Wong leaned forwards. ‘This is not a problem, really.’

‘Go on,’ said Tan.

‘You want to attract money to a new venture. Not difficult. New machine was placed in the east. The room is not too crowded with machines. There are many areas where it could have been placed. More people would go past it if it was close to the front of the hall. But it was placed in the east. The reasoning is obvious.’

He stopped, and there was silence. Madam Xu stared at him, a spoon halfway to her mouth.

‘Not to me,’ said the Superintendent.

‘The trigram of the east is symbolised by the flowering of plants. By the green of fresh grass. By the dawn. This is the location of the forces of birth and growth. Perfect for a new business venture. Whoever placed the new machine there knew about the flow of energy. Or maybe just good luck.’

Madam Xu was unsatisfied. ‘So the east of the room is better for feng shui factors, but that does not answer the question. Why did people put money into it?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Wong. ‘But maybe the people who did it put a sign on it.’

‘A sign?’

‘A sign saying something like “High-speed deposits here”. So they get all deposits. You remember customers said they put money in deposit machine?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Joyce, suddenly excited. ‘You put a sign on the machine saying “All Deposits Here for Instant Service” or something. Then everyone carrying dosh to put *in* the bank would deposit it in that one. Or most people, anyway.’

The Superintendent was intrigued. ‘Possible, quite possible. So the customers pull cash out of the other machines, but only pump cash into the villains’ one. Can or not, Mr Sturmer?’

‘Could work. I giss that would be one why of maximising your collecting of deposits.’

Tan picked a piece of cardamom out of a crevice between his teeth. ‘Now we are thinking. Let us take this further. They have dressed them-selves up as bank technical people and wheeled in this fake machine, battery-powered, which takes deposits only. Has a big sign on top: deposit machine. How do they empty it? Do you leave all your ill-gotten gains in the machine on the premises day after day, knowing that you would eventually be found out? Helluva risky, no?’

‘Not need to,’ said Wong. ‘You have a cow. You milk it every day, yes or no? One of the villains—maybe it is a different one every day—he-she comes like normal customer. He uses deposit machine. But he takes all money out.’

Madam Xu objected. ‘But you just said that the machine would not give out money, only take money in.’

Wong looked at Joyce, who had suddenly taken on the role of technology expert.

‘Er, yeah. It would be easy to fix that,’ she said. ‘Quite easy. Whoever programmed the computer would know the commands which would like, open a little door and send the money out. You just have a hot key.’

Another moment of silence.

‘Explain, please,’ said the geomancer.

‘A hot key is just this key which you press and it toggles from one thing to another thing,’ the young woman explained. ‘So you press the hot key and it changes from the basic program, which is a thing for you to write down what money you are putting in, to a screen which you can use to like, get all the money collected.’

Superintendent Tan spoke with his mouth full. ‘But how would you stop other people from pressing this hot key?’

‘Password.’

Wong, who had jotted down the words ‘toggle’ and ‘hot key’ for further study, said: ‘Yes, this would seem very normal. Man or woman walks up to a bank money machine. Presses buttons. Types in a password. Takes money out. This is very normal. No one would think anything strange.’

‘I suppose so,’ said the banker, who had absently started to eat and had a spoonful of brinjal hovering in front of him. ‘Still, I don’t see how they could have done all this without the bank staff noticing. I mean, this hypothetical machine was right on the bank premises. We have a security guard there the whole time.’

‘But think about it,’ Madam Xu cut in. ‘All he saw was normal bank procedures: customers using machines, and occasionally teams of bank technicians, or people who looked like bank technicians, installing or removing machines. Nothing unusual, is it?’

The banker mused. ‘Well mai-be. But I still reckon avoiding discovery would have been tricky. You see, the bank’s own staff visit the machines every day to reload them.’

‘I ask a question,’ said Wong. ‘Does the bank staff come at same time every day?’

‘Er, yes, I think they come every night, twice on Friday nights, Monday mornings and at weekends.’

‘There is an answer, then. At night, one of the villains comes in. He wears bank worker clothes. He covers their machine with “out of order” sign. Any bank staff member who sees it will think technical department’s job to fix.’

Sturmer asked: ‘But when the technical people arrive to fix it . . . ?’

‘No,’ said Wong. ‘No one calls technical people. Guard won’t call. Not his job. Also, everyone will assume that technical people will be notified already. Whoever put the out-of order sign there would have done it. So people think.’

The banker was silent, carefully digesting this suggestion. ‘Could work,’ he said at last. He spoke slowly. ‘Just maibe. The front office, which reloads the machine at night, would assume that an out-of-order machine would be the responsibility of the back office. The back office, seeing a deposits-only machine, would assume that this was some new procedure being tried out by the front office. Neither side would need to discuss it with the other.’

Suddenly he leaned back and laughed. 'Quite funny, really. Could happen. You couldn't do something like that in a bank with real people, but a large, busy, 24-hour automatic banking hall is different. Behaviour is governed by procedure. You set up a scam which slots neatly enough into the system but does not affect the official procedure, and no one notices. Damn sharp.'

Tan smiled. 'Interesting. Thanks, mystics. You've done your job. You've given us some fresh ideas. Now comes the tough part, which is my job: tracking down the villains. The machine with all their fingerprints on it, presumably, will be miles away by now.'

'Our only chance is the video tapes. There must be photos of the guys,' said the New Zealander.

Tan shook his head. 'Trouble is, the perps will be expecting us to study the pics and will be heavily disguised,' said the police officer. 'I wouldn't put much hope in that. Maybe very tough to find them.'

Madam Xu said: 'Well, as you say, that's your job. Tracking down criminals. Much too dangerous for elderly people like ourselves, Ms McQuinnie excepted, of course.'

Sturmer wiped his mouth with his napkin and spoke to Tan. 'I want to get back to the bank. See if these ideas can help the investigative team.'

Wong looked up. 'Just wait a minute, please. Can I talk to you a bit about the feng shui contract for United World Banking Corporation?'

'Can we do it another time?' asked Sturmer, getting to his feet. 'I'm grateful for your help, but I'm kinda busy now, as you can imagine. Let me pay for this meal.'

'Just for a minute please,' said the geomancer, and something in his voice made Sturmer sit down again. 'Need to tell you something. C F Wong & Associates had the contract for feng shui readings at all branches of your bank. Until two years ago. The contract was not renewed.'

'I was in the Sydney office then. Only been here for twelve months. Don't know anything about it.'

'I will explain. Your bank gave the contract to another feng shui reader. He is cheaper. But maybe does not stick to the high standards of C F Wong & Associates.'

Tan interrupted. 'I'm sure Mr Sturmer can arrange for you to have another interview with the decision-maker on such matters, C F, see if you

can get the contract back, okay or not?’

Sturmer nodded, and rose to his feet again.

‘Oh no,’ said the geomancer. ‘I am not saying this because I want the contract back. I am saying this to give you more information.’

‘I’m listening,’ said the banker.

The geomancer flicked open the map book on the table. ‘I keep a little eye on your banks. I knew them so well from the time I was feng shui reader there. I need to see whether feng shui done correctly or not. Feng shui is business like any other. We need to keep an eye on rivals. This is extra true for cheaper ones. Most of the branches are okay. One or two not so good. The Somerset Road branch all wrong. Has some errors that can be fixed. I can do that for you some time. He put goldfish on the west side. Very crazy thing to do. But never mind.’

‘Sure,’ said Sturmer.

‘Your small electronic banking section on Mosque Street is very big problem. I think I can say it is urgent problem. You need to fix immediately. Feng shui is bad. But in an odd way. The room is strange shape. There is cutting ch’i points right at name-plate of the bank. Very bad. Very negative. The position of the machines is okay but the position of bank name, no. There is a *ba gua* mirror—you know, eight-side feng shui mirror with trigrams—but it is placed inside. Is facing the bank name. Makes it worse. Almost like geomancer has tried to make it bad as possible for the bank. Instead of good.’

Tan was getting impatient. ‘C F, do we really have to go through all this now? Can’t you just write a report or . . .’

Sturmer held up his hand to interrupt the police officer. ‘Jist a minute, Superintendent. We don’t have an electronic bank in Mosque Street. We don’t have any branches in Mosque Street.’

‘This is what I am telling you,’ said the geomancer. ‘Yet this bank has your name on it.’

Sturmer abruptly sat down. ‘Do you think . . . ? I mean, are you sure it is our bink?’

‘United World Banking Corporation, it says, in big letters, across the top. Also your logo.’

‘Could it be the same people . . . ?’ asked the banker, turning to Tan.

The Superintendent was speechless.

‘I don’t know,’ said Wong. ‘But, if I can remember right—it is hard for oldster like me, who is more than fifty years old—there are two machines in this electronic bank. One has an out-of-order sign on it. The other one, I think, has a sign, says: “High-speed deposits”. I only notice this because feng shui of the room so bad. I was hoping no one thinks I am responsible for it. Singapore is a small town. Not difficult for me to keep eye on the few branches of your bank.’ The geomancer shook his head in dismay at the memory of the ill-designed room.

‘So that’s how you knew about the deposit-at-this-machine sign,’ said Madam Xu. ‘You let us all think it was an inspired guess. I think that’s cheating, Mr Wong.’

Tan’s mouth dropped open. ‘If it’s got your bank’s name on it, but it’s not your bank, it’s got to be some sort of scam.’ He pulled out his pocket phone. ‘I hope to heaven it’s the same people, trying to do a similar trick in a different location. This may be an opportunity for us to do our part. Paydirt.’ He leapt to his feet.

‘What does paydirt mean?’ asked Wong.

‘I don’t know. Ask your assistant,’ said Tan, thumping the phone buttons.

Joyce blinked. The space between her eyebrows turned into a little grid. ‘Don’t know. It’s just what people say when they find something they’ve been looking for, for a long time.’

Old Uberoi appeared through the steam with two large dishes, one containing string hoppers, and one egg hoppers.

‘Oh, paydirt,’ said Madam Xu, clapping her hands.





## 7 Spice of life

*The Chuang-tzu, chuan seven, says: 'The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not move with things, nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things but does not retain them.'*

*The same feeling of detachment can be found in another ancient text. The Yi-ch'uan Chi-jang Chi, chuan fourteen. Here you read the words of Shao Yung. He said this:*

*The name of the Master of Happiness is not known.  
For thirty years he has lived on the banks of the Lo River.  
His feelings are those of the wind and the moon;  
His spirit is on the river and the lake.  
To him there is no distinction  
Between low position and high rank,  
Between poverty and riches.  
He does not move with things nor anticipate them.  
He has no restraints and no taboos.  
He is poor, but has no sorrow.  
He drinks but is never drunk.  
He gathers the springtime of the world into his mind.*

*Blade of Grass, slowly-slowly you are becoming wise. But remember this. The strength of the mind is the strength of its detachment.*

*From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'*

*by C F Wong, part 131.*

His journal tucked safely in the briefcase he clutched to his chest, C F Wong trotted briskly along the cracked and crowded pavements, his head held high.

A visit to Delhi is a very good reminder that one has a nose, he mused. Too often in visiting a city, the other senses prevail. One is visually entranced by the skylines of Singapore and Hong Kong; one's ears are assaulted by the cacophony of construction in Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur; but here in old Delhi, you can conduct yourself by your nose alone. The tingling torrent of petrol fumes and dust tells you where the roads are, while the paved areas are marked by coriander, incense, spices, sugar, smoke, urine, new sweat, old sweat, plus some curious odour of burnt material which appeared peculiar to the oldest parts of the original part of India's capital, although he had yet to identify what it was. Wong took a deep breath through his wide, flat nostrils to try out this theory, and immediately regretted it. The smells were so strong they hurt.

They jogged around a blind corner at speed and the geomancer was forcefully reminded of his other senses as he hit the side of some grey-brown monster—an elephant? No, a bullock. It turned baggy and infinitely sad eyes at him. He was repelled by the strangely inorganic way its rough, leathery skin hung like an ill-fitting cape off its angular bones. *Aiyeeeah*. Wong edged carefully through the small space between the fly-covered beast and a dusty, coughing bus that was dangerously nudging its way through a lane solid with human and animal flesh.

For the tenth time, Wong scanned the bewildering scene ahead of them and wondered if they had lost their guide. The boy slid through tiny, fast-closing gaps in the crowd so often that few observers would have thought he had any connection with the old Chinese gentleman and the young Caucasian woman following.

'Jeez. Does he have to go so fast?' cursed Joyce, who had trouble keeping up as she wanted to take photographs of what she called 'characters'—old people with lived-in faces. 'Has he like, totally forgotten we're supposed to be following him?' Her testy comments belied the fact that she was thoroughly enjoying her first visit to India. The feng shui master's assistant found it totally seductive, with the sights and colours and smells and tastes combining to suck her almost into a state of trance.

They had arrived late the previous night, so she had only really taken her first good look at India in the morning light. The desolate tranquility of Rose House, the old colonial mansion in Uttar Pradesh where they were staying, had been wonderfully calming. The pleasant dry heat, too, was quite unlike the uncomfortable humidity of Singapore. She had rinsed out a thin cotton top and hung it on the balcony to dry before going down to breakfast. An hour later, after a wonderful breakfast of mangoes, pale-yoked eggs and homemade yogurt, the garment had been dry enough to wear.

Then they had gone into town. The old city of Delhi was equally mesmerising but in a different way. It was happy pandemonium. There was something hypnotic about being in this huge, hyperactive mob, surrounded by swirls of multicoloured silk, she decided. It wasn't just the women who caught her eye. Many of the men appeared curiously fashionable, with their retro 1970s-style haircuts, Burt Reynolds' moustaches and flared trousers. But were they truly wearing retro fashions? Or had the man in the old Delhi street simply not changed styles for thirty years?

'I see him! Follow,' said Wong, and thrust himself through a tiny opening between two motor-scooters, one of which was carrying a family of four, and the other a family of five, plus a monkey.

Joyce took one more photograph, this time of a bald spice-seller who looked at least 150 years old, and dived after her employer.

Five breathless minutes later, the pair were relieved to reach the commercial building which had been described to them in the briefing notes faxed to the office by Laurence Leong of East Trade Industries. The Associated Food and Beverages Delhi Manufactory Old Building was a crumbly, grey block on a busy corner. On first glance it appeared to be leaning to the left, but the careful observer soon realised this impression was the result of curious architectural design, featuring stepped overhangs. Joyce knew this would mean a heavy over-supply of something. She watched as Wong looked up to locate the harsh glare of the sun behind cumulus clouds. 'Southwest influences. Maternal female ch'i,' he said. 'Difficult, difficult.'

Following a fleeting glimpse of their guide slipping past the uniformed security guards—who were holding hands, a sight Joyce had been told was common in India, but which continued to surprise her—they entered the

building. Or rather they entered a time warp. She felt as if she was in the Edwardian era. The furniture was old, dark wood, with parts of it looking like genuine mahogany. The walls were panelled with some cheaper hardwood that someone apparently thought would match but didn't. There was a dying plant on the receptionist's desk and two old, black bakelite telephones, plus a small switchboard system of the sort favoured in early Clark Gable movies.

'Cool,' said Joyce.

'Hot,' said Wong, mopping his face with a handkerchief.

After a brief wait, the two of them were led up an old staircase to a rectangular conference room and introduced to many executives of the company, all of whom had identical moustaches and names featuring an extraordinary number of syllables, nearly all of which over-featured the letter 'a'. There was a Mr Nadarajah and a Mr Vishwanathan and a Mr Kanagaratnum. The last of these added, in a strong north Indian accent: 'But you may cull me Ravi.' Joyce's thanks were heart-felt.

There was much open staring at the young Caucasian woman, and one elderly bald man commented quietly to Wong: 'She doesn't look very Chinese.'

The geomancer turned his eyes to his assistant and nodded as if he was noticing this for the first time. He nodded. 'Yes. She does not look very Chinese.'

After the exchange of pleasantries, the conversation quickly dried up. Wong was anxious to escape the small talk and get down to work. 'Where are the rooms, Mr Ravi?'

'Not Mr Ravi. Ravi is my farst name. I'll just write your names in our visitors jarnal and then we'll go. Come, come.' As they walked, Ravi explained that he was the external relations manager for Associated Foods, and would be looking after them during their stay. He led them down a dark corridor to a door leading to another gloomy passage. A slow-moving, potbellied man with pockmarked cheeks, Ravi's calm, warm smile was welcome after the tumult of the streets. A turn to the left, another to the right, and the ascension of a small flight of steps led them to the room of the man who had died.

'Here, this is the place,' said the Indian executive, smoothing down his moustache with his finger and thumb as if he felt it were stuck on with

insufficient glue. ‘Mr Sooti Sekhar’s old room.’

It was a large office, ill-organised and unappealing. Even without the use of his *lo pan* to take bearings, Wong could see many ways in which the room had not been properly formed. There was a desk sideways to the main door, leaving the occupant with his back to a second door. Light should have come from a series of tall sash windows on the far side, but bookcases and filing cabinets obscured them. Several jagged edges caused the ch’i energy to flip and swirl. The room reeked of musty paper, overlaying a damp, mildew-like smell. Ravi flipped a pair of switches, but only one of the two ceiling fans started to whirl.

Stepping into the middle of the room, Wong became aware that it was a distorted L-shape. ‘Ah. This room needs much work,’ he said. As did the rest of the building, he thought, wondering why he was not required to review the entire premises.

Ravi seemed to sense the question. ‘We are wanting you to do your thing here, because this wing is the international division, and most of the Far East deals are being done here. See those files over there?’ He pointed to a wall of filing cabinets and cupboards. ‘All the Far East deals are there, including, in that locked one on the right, the papers that bind us to your own East Trade Industries. Our Far East Division staff work in that room there, behind Sekhar’s desk. At the moment, there’s only one person there, a Malaysian woman, Ms Dev.’

He pointed to the main desk and the chairs around it.

‘We used to be big in niche Far East animal products, ivory, tiger medicines, things like that. Sekhar did all that for us. When we have clients from the Far East, they were always dealt with by Sekhar in here, around this table. After Sekhar died, some of them said that the feng shui was bad here. That’s why this room needs a touch of your magic, if you don’t mind me calling it that.’

‘I understand. You have no need of feng shui readings to be done in other parts of the building.’

‘Correct. They’re all Hindus on that side, except for some Muslims in one of the departments, who make their own arrangements, but you don’t have to worry about all that. You’ve just got to fix up this room and the one behind that door on that side, to keep our Far East clients happy, and of course our Singapore shareholders.’ He said this last line with a nod and a

half-smile, to acknowledge the corporate bonds between Associated Foods and East Trade.

‘I thought you weren’t allowed to sell ivory and stuff?’ asked Joyce.

‘Yes, this sector is warsening worldwide. We are dropping the animal products entirely and going to relaunch this part of the operation as import–export of appliances. More politically correct.’

He pressed his moustache onto his upper lip again. ‘One more thing. The internal engineering team, who will reorganise the office and redecorate it after you have done your stuff, they are only available tomorrow and the day after. That means that you only have today to do your readings. I hope that will be enough time for you.’

‘It is not much time. But I think I can do it,’ said Wong.

The executive left the room with a polite farewell nod, and Wong and McQuinnie spent some time talking to the one remaining staff member of the Far East Division, who was spending the day packing files into boxes, in advance of the redecoration. The woman, Mardiyah Dev, had been with the company ten years, and was happy to tell them the full story.

Sooti Sekhar’s history was that of many young executives. He had joined the company some twelve years ago as an enthusiastic thirty-year-old fellow of a university near Mumbai, and risen relatively quickly up the ladder to be assistant director of sales of animal products by the time he was thirty-six. Two years later, he had settled, quite happily, in a job which required little effort from him, as executive director of sales of animal products. This was a bit of a sinecure, since he simply had to analyse sales trends for his sector, with those under him doing the active sales work.

‘Although some people were surprised that he was happy to be deskbound, the timing seemed to be right. He was then thirty-eight, he had got married to someone his parents had chosen for him, they had had a couple of sons, and he no longer wanted to travel half the year,’ said Ms Dev, a rather solid woman in her thirties. ‘For a few years, he had lived a simple life. He worked nine to five, he spent his Sundays with his family, he occasionally went out for a drink with friends. There was less and less work to do. But then the division was reorganised, he was moved to that dark room, and he became more and more quiet.’

Her brow wrinkled as unpleasant memories came to the fore. ‘About a year ago, he still said good morning, but it was more of a groan than a

greeting. There was just two of us left by then.'

'Poor you. Must've been a major downer. Did you like, ask him what was wrong?' asked Joyce. Wong was glad his assistant was with him. His questions always sounded harshly interrogatory compared to hers, which came across as sympathetic concern.

'Oh yes, we were good friends,' the woman replied. 'He insisted that nothing was wrong. His wife and children were happy and healthy. He had no debts, as far as I knew.'

Wong looked around the old-fashioned room. It was not a happy room, but neither were the negative forces in it great enough to kill its occupant. Its wooden furniture and hand-built cupboards were actually rather more attractive and durable than the modular furniture of modern cities, although this particular office probably underwent less wear and tear than the somewhat ragged reception downstairs. 'Business was good?' he asked.

'Not particularly,' said Ms Dev. 'Animal products is not a good line to be in these days, and there was shrinkage. But it was gradual. Nothing dramatic.'

The Malaysian woman said 'nothing' as 'nut-thing', having picked up an Indian lilt in her many years here, he noted. 'And then . . . ?'

'Well . . .' She tilted her head diagonally to one side, another habit clearly picked up from Indian colleagues. 'And then suddenly he was dead. At the age of forty-two. We couldn't believe it. It was amazing. I mean, he had the usual executive stress problems—stomach ulcers and so on—but he was unusually fit. He had a line of trophies for sports things he had won. It was in that glass case over there. He was long-jump champion at his university or something. It was almost as if his energy was running out, as if he was a battery, and one day it was all gone. And then bang. Heart attack.'

'At his desk?' asked Wong.

'At his desk.'

'There was an autopsy?'

'Sekhar's brother-in-law is a doctor and dealt with the body. He said it was natural causes. There did not seem to be any controversy about it. He had no enemies, no one to, you know, poison him or anything.'

'Jeez. Poor fella. Was he like okay to work with?' asked Joyce.

'Yes, he was a very nice man. He was moody, and a bit dispiriting, and his health went downhill—he had a bit of flatulence towards the end, but I

don't think that would have killed him,' Ms Dev said with an embarrassed smile.

The story of Sooti Sekhar's unexplained death at an early age intrigued the feng shui master. He knew that in such cases, there are often financial problems which do not appear until after the death. He attempted to mentally will Joyce to continue her sympathetic inquiries, and was surprised to find her doing just that.

'Like, how were his wife and children? They must have been like, utterly devastated and stuff.'

'They were okay,' said Mardiyah Dev. 'I mean, they were upset, of course, but I think they were all right in the financial sense. Sekhar had some savings, he had paid off their mortgage on their big house, and I think he was insured. You can ask his wife. She works part-time in despatch at Deshpande's.'

'Deshpande's?'

'It's a handbag factory. Just about eight minutes down that way. Near the old market. You can take a taxi.'

Wong smiled. 'Thank you for your help.'

The rooms required a great deal of work. The geomancer and his assistant spent the whole of that afternoon poring over floor plans, drawing charts, making measurements, and watching how the light moved in the rooms, as the sun was reflected in from the frosted windows of an old red stone office block opposite. Almost every item in the room was in the wrong place, and the mis-positioning of doors caused enormous trouble, with a too-fast flow of piercing northeast energy right across Sekhar's old desk. No wonder he had been unhappy.

The main room was not quite a rectangle, having been designed with an extension to the southwest. This direction is associated with prosperity, but only if the proportions are correct, Wong explained to his assistant. In this case, the extension was too large in relation to the main room and would threaten the inhabitants with a desire to be over-active. Mr Sekhar had fought this by going to the opposite extreme and slowing down, which often happens, he said. The result would have been too great a flow of unresolved ch'i energy, leading to ill health.

Wong leaned out of the tall sash window and gave a yelp of triumph. 'Waah!'



‘What is it?’ Joyce looked over from the table where she was looking at two charts Wong had produced—a *lo shu* chart based on Sooti Sekhar’s date of birth and another for the construction date of the building.

‘Water pipes. Some big water pipes from the building. They pass just outside here. On the southwest. One of the worst places to have water. Water is good. But in the southwest lives the soil ch’i energy. Destroys the water benefits. Very bad design.’

Wong looked back over his shoulder and grinned, unable to hide his delight at having found a major hidden fault so quickly. The geomancer returned to the table and busied himself with his diagrams again.

The bored young woman picked up a yellowing copy of *The Hindustan Times* and spent some time reading the matrimonial advertisements. After a few minutes, her mouth dropped open. ‘Just look at these. “Wanted, beautiful fair-skinned bride. Under twenty-five.” “Wanted, Sikh engineer or doctor boy under thirty.” These have got to be illegal. They just *have* to be.’

She flipped through the classifieds. They fascinated her, and she sat down, studying them for the next ten minutes. ‘This has got to be the most sexist, ageist, racist place in the world. All the marriage ads say the girl must be fair-skinned and beautiful, and all the job ads say applicants must be under thirty or under thirty-five. It’s amazing. You have to be young and light-skinned to get anywhere in India. I could probably earn more than you can here.’

Two hours later, they broke for lunch with Ravi Kanagaratnum and with Sooti Sekhar’s replacement, a Sikh named Jagdish who had learned *Putonghua* after four years in the company’s Beijing office. Wong said he wanted to visit Deshpande’s and have a brief talk with Sekhar’s widow.

‘Oh, you don’t need to do that,’ said Ravi. ‘We just want you to get the room straight so Jagdish can deal with the Chinese clients there. Look ahead, look forwards, there is no need to be looking backwards.’

‘It is difficult to fix the problem if I do not know the full problem,’ said Wong. ‘Must be serious problem. This man dies at age only forty-two.’

‘I am just thinking there will not be enough time. The engineering department will arrive at nine o’clock tomorrow morning to do those two rooms, and all the plans will have to be ready by then,’ said Ravi.

Jagdish cut in. ‘Why so little time? Why not postpone internal engineering for a few days so that these people can do a good job? I don’t

want to die at the age of forty-two. That's only four years away. I have yet to father a son. I better get cracking. Are you free, Ms McQuinnie?' he asked, with a cheeky laugh.

'Ha. If you help me buy a sari, I will refuse you nothing,' she replied. Then she blushed, wondering if what she had said was too flirtatious. She looked down and studied her hands.

'Engineering is only free for two days and then they have some big assignments,' Ravi said to his colleague. 'Besides, I want to get this business over with and move on. Far East business is terrible. We need to give it a buck up.'

The Sikh appeared unconvinced. 'He died very young. I think if Mr Wong thinks that seeing Sooti's wife would help tie up the loose ends, we should get him to see her.'

The external relations manager slowly unwrapped a sweetmeat from its leaf wrapping and popped it into his mouth before replying: 'Very well. I'm not stubborn. I could arrange to have her brought to my office and you could come and ask her questions. I wouldn't mind asking her a few question myself.'

'I want to be on her alone,' said Wong.

Ravi's eyebrows rose.

Joyce quickly interpreted: 'He means he wants like a one-on-one interview with her.'

'I'm afraid that really is impossible,' said Ravi. 'This is India. A man cannot see a young widow alone. It is not seemly. No, it would have to be in my office.'

'No problem,' said Joyce. 'I'll go and see her by myself. Two women talking is okay, isn't it? Ms Dev said it was near the old market. I wanna go down there anyway, do some shopping.'

Ravi smiled. 'Very well,' he said. 'It's not very far. You can take a company taxi or you can even wark.'

Joyce nodded her head diagonally. 'I'll wark, I mean walk, thank you.'



After lunch, Joyce took a long, lazy meander through the marketplace to the offices of Deshpande Handbag Manufactory Company, stopping regularly to take photographs. The midday heat made her dizzy and she stopped to buy a fresh king coconut from a street vendor. It was like drinking liquid energy. She found Delhi, like Hong Kong and Singapore, was a buzzy place, full of people hurrying and scurrying on their missions. Yet there was also something spiritual about it. People often had their hands together as if praying, and there were gods and shrines and holy pictures everywhere, sometimes interspersed with pictures of the Spice Girls and Elvis.

The young woman initially had some difficulty entering the garment firm's offices, but a phone call to Ravi helped sort out the problem—the Associated Foods executive had a cousin on the board of Deshpande's. Access was quickly arranged.

The handbag factory was noisy, dark and chaotic. Joyce McQuinnie soon found herself in a small room, loaned by a junior manager, talking to Mrs Kumari Sekhar, an attractive 29-year-old woman who looked too young to have children of eleven and twelve. The young Westerner was fascinated by the Indian woman's large, dark-rimmed eyes and wondered whether it would be unprofessional to ask what sort of eyeliner she used.

Better stick to business. Feeling very adult, she explained to the young mother that she was working for her late husband's company's Far Eastern shareholders, and just wanted to see if there was anything she wanted to talk about, anything to clear up.

'You mean like returning of office properties?' the woman asked in a strong Delhi accent. 'He never took anything home, only paper clips, occasionally he would be having a pen with the company name, only like that. You can come and see in my home. There's nut-thing.'

'No, no, I am not like being the big nasty corporate big brother or anything, no way. We're just like, really sorry he died and stuff. I just wanted to know if anything was wrong, whether he had any like, problems or anything?'

'Oh, I see,' said the widow. She thought for a while, and then leaned forwards, not conspiratorially, but as an apparent gesture of trust. 'Nut-thing. He had a bad cold one time last year, couldn't shake it, and sometimes a bad stomach, but basically he was so healthy. Used to boast that he never went to a doctor. Never took a pill. No, he was healthy in

body. When he started to go downhill, my brother—he's a doctor—checked him out and just told Sooti to take more exercise, go to his bar a bit less. You know he liked to go out with his friends before coming home.'

Joyce unwisely took a generous sip of the tumbler-full of unidentifiable yellow-pink liquid which had been placed in front of her. She grimaced and nearly spat it out when she found it was lukewarm milky tea containing at least three spoonfuls of sugar. She tried to turn her scowl into a smile.

'He went out boozing and stuff lots?'

'Oh no, I am not meaning he was a drunkard or anything like that. His father was a Muslim. Sooti used to be a teetotaller too. Then, maybe a year ago, he started to have one glass of wine or a Kingfisher with his meal. Maybe he would have two Kingfishers, or maybe three if it was a long evening. But still moderate. He was never drunk. Never in his life was he drunk.'

'Did he stay out late very often?'

'Never. Usually came home about 8.30 or nine, not late.'

'Did he gamble?'

'Never.'

'Borrow money?'

'No.'

'He sounds a cool dude.'

'Kul-doot?'

'I mean, like a good husband.'

'He was. Very very good man.'

'It must have been awful for you. Him being so young. How are you like, you know, getting on?'

'Oh, it was a shock all right, but I am over it now. Nearly four months ago he died. We did the mourning properly.'

'What about, er, money and stuff? You have two kids, right?'

'Yes, certainly, the loss of income was a worry at first. But we saved a lot of money and Sooti had two life insurance policies. We do not need to worry. We have a house. My parents are still alive and live nearby.'

'That's really neat. The insurance companies have already paid up?'

'One has paid, the other has agreed to shortly. Because he was so young . . .' She paused, apparently rather uncomfortable about something.

Joyce gave her a look which she hoped was a mixture of friendliness and concern.

The widow continued: 'I do not like to tell everyone this, but you are from his boss, who already knows this. Because Sooti was quite young, only forty-two, the pay-outs are actually quite large. We are very fortunate that he took such policies out. I do not really have to continue working. In fact I have handed in my resignation and am leaving at the end of the month.'

'That was lucky,' said Joyce.

'Yes,' she said. 'The gods have been very kind.'

'Yeah, cool. Like, er, did you take out this insurance a long time ago?'

'Quite a long time. A year, maybe two years ago. Not me. I don't know much about all that. Sooti handled it all, but left the policies in my father's strongbox for me to get if anything happened to him.'

'Great,' said Joyce. 'I'm really glad to hear that you and the kids will be okay. Do you mind if I just ask you a question about your eyeliner?'



Late that afternoon, Ravi, who was clearly taking his role as genial host seriously, asked the visitors if they wanted to eat out or be entertained in some way. 'Or would you like to go home? I understand you are staying at Mrs Daswani's place in UP. I can arrange a car to take you back there. Any jet lag to sleep off?'

Wong said: 'We like to have dinner at a club. The club where Mr Sekhar used to go to after work.'

Joyce added: 'Yeah, you see we're having some trouble visualising what went wrong in that room.'

'Fine,' said Ravi, waving to a small man with a large head. 'Peon!'

A noisy taxi ride in a tiny, cramped old car, grossly mis-named an Ambassador (anything less ambassadorial would be hard to imagine) took them first to Janpath, a main road in the centre of New Delhi. From there, they turned eastwards onto a road crowded with cars and bicycles, and drove over an old bridge into a more suburban area. 'They really do use

their horns instead of their brakes,’ commented Joyce, watching in horror as their vehicle simply pushed carts, bicycles and pedestrians out of the way.

After twenty minutes driving, they entered an area of high-class suburbs. The roads were still wide, but the press of population was much less. With its grand avenues and tree-lined streets, the young woman decided New Delhi was interestingly different from the old city, at the same time more stately but less charming.

Then the roads suddenly became narrow and the houses less prepossessing. The small car took them to the Go Go Club, in a dingy, ramshackle street on the northern outskirts of New Delhi.

Despite its name, the Go Go Club was a rather Spartan basement canteen. The inmates, clusters of middle-aged men energetically shovelling rice into their mouths, seemed content enough, judging by the loud and animated conversations in which they were engaged. They stopped talking for a minute to examine the foreign visitors, but the noise quickly returned to its former level.

The magnolia paint on the walls was peeling slightly, but the orange-hued light fixtures gave the restaurant a warm appearance, and the smell of hot, spicy food was undeniably enticing, particularly for Wong, who had a taste for any food which bit back.

Ravi ordered, and the two visitors were quickly presented with a huge selection of dishes. There was no meat, because Ravi was a vegetarian, and the potato curry was a more fluo-rescent yellow than anything Joyce had eaten before. But the food was delicious. Joyce took tiny bites, and drank six glasses of water. While eating, they chatted with club manager Anish Butt about Mr Sekhar’s visits.

Butt, a scrawny man of about seventy with a neck wrinkled like a turkey’s, champed his nearly toothless gums and spoke at length about The Deceased, whom he had known, he said, for at least twenty years.

‘Oh yes, indeed, The Deceased’s father used to come in here and Sooti came as a boy. Then he got the job with Associated and he came on his own steam. Three, four times a week, and then the last year he used to come almost every day, on his way back from work.’

‘Was there any change?’ asked Wong. ‘Did he drink more?’

‘When he was younger, he never drank. He was a Muslim, but not religious. Then he started drinking a little bit, but not a problem. Couple of

Kingfishers, that's all.'

Joyce asked: 'Did he come with the same people all the time?'

'Mostly alone. Sometimes with Mr Kanagaratnum,' he said, pointing at Ravi. 'You become good friends, no?'

'To some extent,' said Ravi. 'He was a difficult man to get to know. Not much of a talker. Once a week or so I would join him here. He never spoke of any health problems. I'm still stunned that he is dead.'

The club manager went to tend to other customers, and the three diners spent the rest of the meal talking about the relationship between the Indian firm and the Far East ones, the standard corporate chit-chat of business travellers. Joyce gave Ravi a piece of paper on which was written the name of a cosmetics company. 'Do you know where I could get stuff from this company? They make like, totally fab eyeliner.'

Ravi was a great eater. He consumed everything that was left on the trays when Wong and McQuinnie were finished, polished off a fifth beer, patted his rice-belly and then took the young woman on a tour of the club's facilities, which included a library and a gymnasium that was so under-used that several of the machines had never been plugged in.

Wong told them that he would wait for them in the canteen.

While he was putting on his suit-coat, he chatted briefly with the club's oldest waiter, who had a walrus moustache that would have better suited a British major-general.

'Please, what do you remember about Mr Sekhar's visits?'

'His favourite for years used to be *aloo makhani* and chicken *korma*,' said the old man, his voice slightly muffled by the weight of hair on his upper lip and lack of teeth. 'Lately he got this taste for *vindaloos*, double *vindaloos* and *palis* even. He quickly became hot-stuff king, and used to challenge the chef to make something too hot for him to eat.'

'Did he eat alone? Or with friends?'

'Sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. Sometimes Mr Kanagaratnum, Mr Jagdish, Mr Govind, or someone else from the company. No one could eat the killer chilli like Mr Sekhar, though. Our food is quite hot.'

'Is,' Wong said. He had lost all sensation in his tongue, although he considered himself an experienced eater of spicy food. 'He drink much beer?'

‘No. Always two Kingfishers, three on special occasions.’

‘Did he ever talk to you about any problem?’

‘Business was not so good. He used to sometimes come alone and bring business papers, all numbers, and he would do sums while he ate. Once I saw him by himself and he seemed to be crying into his bhaji. He never talked to me about his problems, though.’

‘Thank you,’ said Wong as his companions returned.



That night, Wong worked in his room at Rose House until midnight. He then slept until about five o'clock when he had to rise and go to the toilet rather urgently. He stayed in the bathroom for a long while. Fortunately, he did not feel particularly ill. He suspected that the food he had eaten had not been bad, but was eliciting complaints from his stomach because of its unfamiliarity.

Dawn came slowly. Over an uneaten breakfast, Joyce was unusually silent, and was later induced to admit that she had had similar problems with her digestion.

Their host, Mrs Daswani, laughed. ‘I’m sorry, but our bacteria here in India are quite unique. It always takes visitors a few days to get used to it. Some tourists swear by a slug of whisky every night. Kills all known germs. You’ll be fine in a few hours.’

Both the visitors slumped silently in the car as they were driven to the centre of town. They were back at the Associated Food and Beverages Delhi Manufactory Old Building at 9.30 a.m., and Ravi led them to the Far East department, which they knew they would never have re-found without him. The internal engineering department’s team was standing at attention, waiting for the plans. The two visitors spent the next hour giving detailed instructions to the foreman and his staff.

Wong and McQuinnie then moved to a spare office, near Kanagaratnum’s. The young woman grabbed a phone and started dialling. ‘My uncle’s a journalist,’ she said. ‘I worked in his office for a summer job last year. I’m going to do a bit of what he calls “working the phones”.’



She spent the next half-hour on the phone, being transferred from person to person, until she found what she was looking for: an expert in pathology and poisons at a medical school attached to the university. She had a theory she wanted to check out.

Not for the first time, Wong marvelled at the ability of a Western female to command Asian males to do her bidding. Without any indication of her authority other than her bossy phone manner, Joyce soon had the man obediently answering a lengthy list of questions, which she shouted down the phone, since the line was poor.

‘Dr Prasad, are there poisons which are like, really really slow-working and which would like, not be detected in an autopsy?’

Wong picked up the extension handset to listen to the man’s answer. ‘That is a very hard question, since it all depends on your understanding of what a poison is,’ said the voice on a crackly line. ‘The word usually conjures up images of strychnine, or arsenic, or some forms of mercury perhaps. These quickly and obviously do great damage. But consider alcohol. This is also a lethal poison, but taken in small quantities over a long time, it is not lethal, and some doctors—I am not among them—say it may even do some good. If you drank a bottle of detergent, it would make you very sick. Yet every night, we all consume tiny amounts of detergent left as residue on the cups and plates we use. You see, Ms McQuinnine, almost anything can be a poison if you take an inappropriate quantity of it over an inappropriate period, you see what I am saying?’

‘Yeah. I see. It’s McQuinnie, not McQuinnine. But is there any . . . I mean, like, is there a poison that you could use, and doctors doing an autopsy would just be like, “Oh, it’s natural causes or a heart attack”?’

‘There are many substances which can be introduced at low levels and could eventually lead to death. Most, I am glad to say, are detectable, particularly if the autopsy is done promptly, not more than a couple of days after death.’

‘Okay, thanks Dr Presshard.’

‘Prasad. It’s Prasad.’

During the lunch break, Wong and McQuinnie ate with Mardiyah Dev (at least, Ms Dev ate, while the two visitors pushed food around their plates and took tiny sips of bottled water). The Malaysian woman added little that she had not already told them the previous day. She said she believed Sooti

Sekhar's autopsy had been performed promptly, the morning following his death late one afternoon. 'There were no suspicious circumstances,' she said.

The assignment seemed to be over, the geomancer thought. The rooms had been done, and Sooti Sekhar had been confirmed by all routes of inquiry as a victim of death by natural causes. But Joyce's doggedness had inspired him. Perhaps it would be worth making one final call. They should speak to the man who did the autopsy, he decided.

That afternoon, Wong phoned Dr Ran, brother-in-law of the dead man. The geomancer also had to shout into the phone. 'Hello? Is it Dr Ran? What? Yes? I am Mr Wong from East Trade Industries. I am working today at Associated Food and Beverages. No, no, I am not selling anything. I am a feng shui master. I want to ask you about Mr Sekhar. What? No, I do not want to come to your surgery. Sick? I am not sick. What? You ask what? Who is sicker? No, not sicker. I am not saying sicker. I am saying Sekhar. Your brother-in-law is sicker. I mean Sekhar. Yes, yes, I know he is dead.'

Joyce gently picked up the extension. She waved to him to signify that she would do the talking.

'Hi, Dr Ran, this is Jo McQuinnie, I'm like Mr Wong's assistant. We are doing like a report at Associated on the death of your brother-in-law, and just, er, want to double-check a few things, if you've got a couple of minutes.'

'Very well.' The voice was low and measured.

'Like, er, okay, so what happened?'

'Well, Miss er . . .'

'McQuinnie.'

'Ms McQuinnie. I think you will find that I have supplied my findings to the company already.'

'Would you mind just repeating them? Think of us as, like, fact-checkers.'

'Very well. My brother-in-law had a ventricular infarction, a cardiac arrest. He had become overweight. He was swallowing a lot of digestion tablets in those last months. Fundamentally, I think, it was stress, physical and mental. Simple as that. Now I am really rather busy, so if you would excuse me, I am in the middle of an examination.'

By the end of that afternoon, the rooms were already becoming brighter and more appealing, although one side of the room, where the door was being moved, was a mess of bricks and mortar. Still, the operation was progressing at speed, and Wong thought the job would be complete with relatively few feng shui formalities (a sprinkling of sea salt for example) and a careful final inspection tomorrow.

By eight o'clock that evening, after the usual harrowing taxi ride through permanently honking traffic which seemed to continuously switch lanes for no reason and with no warning, the visitors got back gratefully to the coolness of Mrs Daswani's home in Uttar Pradesh. They sat in wicker chairs on her verandah and sipped fresh mango lassi with a piece of lime floating on the top. The Indian suburban mansion seemed like paradise after a day in the heart of town.

'You look relaxed, Mr Wong,' said Mrs Daswani. 'So have you fixed the rooms at Associated?'

He nodded. 'I think so. It was a big job. So much out of place. But I think we have finished.'

'It was a horrible pair of rooms,' said Joyce. 'Business-people often think big rooms are better, but they can be worse if they are badly laid out. This was dark and like, all out of shape.'

Mrs Daswani smiled. 'But what I want to know is, did it really cause harm to the young man who died? Forgive me for being skeptical, but it still baffles me that inartistically planned furniture can kill a healthy young man.'

Joyce looked at Wong for an answer.

'The feng shui in the room did not kill him. Not directly,' the geomancer said. 'It had an effect. It had a big effect. But it was not the number-one reason.'

'So what did kill him?'

'I can tell you. But in confidence only. You must not tell the company.'

'Very well,' said their hostess, sitting up, suddenly interested. 'What was it?'

'Suicide,' said Wong.

'It was?' asked Joyce, surprised.

'Do tell,' said Mrs Daswani.

'He had a problem. He was very good sales analyst.'

‘That’s a problem?’ asked the young woman.

‘Can be,’ said the geomancer. ‘It is like this. He was ambitious man. Star pupil. Keeps going up the ladder. Up and up and up. Boss loves him. Then he gets stuck as head of animal products sales. Can’t go up any more. Then, I think, he looks at two things. One is the business trend for his division. Far East business in ivory, tiger medicines, deer antlers, all that, is going down. He has chosen wrong specialisation. His department shrinking. He realises his work will one day disappear.’

Wong sipped his drink. ‘Number two. I think, maybe, he looks around at the other old men in his office and in his club. Sad, fat businessmen. Unemployed or underemployed. Both are bad. He did not want to be like them, but cannot not see any way to escape. Very hard to find a new job or change job after age forty in India. Almost impossible.’

‘That’s true if you believe the newspaper ads,’ said Joyce.

‘So he takes out life insurance policies. Big ones. So his wife and children get everything they need all their lives. Then he commits suicide.’

Joyce looked puzzled. ‘But how was it suicide? Everyone said it was natural causes. Some kinda poison, like I suggested?’

‘No. He committed suicide very slowly. He was an eater of *kormas*. *Korma* is number-one mild curry. He had ulcer in his stomach. But he made himself to eat *vindaloos*. He ate extra chilli. Then he had double *vindaloos* and *palis*. Hottest curries. He told the chef to make him spiciest food they could. Gave him great pain. Much bottom gas. When his stomach hurt, he ate many indigestion tablets.’

‘That killed him?’

‘I think so.’

Mrs Daswani was surprised. ‘But how do you know all this?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the geomancer. ‘I only guess. He liked mild curries. But he eats hot ones. He has stomach ulcer. But he eats chilli sauce. He is a teetotaller. But he makes himself drink beer every day. He loves sports. But he stops doing them. He hates pills. But starts swallowing indigestion tablets. So many changes in his life this year. So sudden. Add up. Must be deliberate.’

‘Gosh. He *vindalooed* himself to death,’ said Joyce. ‘Now that is truly weird.’

‘Do you think Dr Ran knew about this?’ Mrs Daswani asked.

‘Maybe,’ said the geomancer. ‘Or not. But Dr Ran is brother of Sekhar’s wife. He also wants family to be happy.’

There was no sound for a minute except the loud, cyclic chirp of cicadas from the garden.

‘What a way to go,’ said the young woman. ‘But it makes sense. No one noticed a thing. I mean, what could be strange about an old Indian guy sitting in a Delhi club eating a curry?’

Mrs Daswani raised her eyebrows. ‘So, C F. Are you going to report that it was suicide, and save the insurance company a fortune?’

‘Take money from children? After he went to such trouble? Certainly not,’ said Wong. ‘Death was natural causes. This is what the doctor says. I am not a doctor. Only feng shui man.’

His hostess laughed.

Wong added: ‘Besides, there are many people slowly murdering themselves with hot curry. I think even I am one.’

The servant boy appeared and struck a gong to signify that dinner was ready. ‘Just wait till you see what we have for you tonight,’ said Mrs Daswani. ‘This will kill you.’



## 8 The taxi driver

*The great sage Lu Hsueh-an lived on the Plain of Jars one thousand years ago. A man came to him. 'Sage. I need your help. I have so many burdens. My house has started to lean over. I think it will fall down.'*

*Lu said: 'Can be fixed.'*

*The man said: 'I have another problem. My chief he does not like me. He wants to get rid of me. What can I do?'*

*Lu said: 'Can be fixed with the same action.'*

*The man said: 'I have yet one more problem. My wife looks at my neighbour. I think she likes him. I don't want her to leave me.'*

*Lu said: 'Also can be fixed with the same action.'*

*The man said: 'What is the action?'*

*Lu said: 'Spend three days in contemplation in a temple on top of a mountain.'*

*The man did this.*

*After, the man returned.*

*Lu said: 'Your problems are fixed. I knocked your house down. I told your chief you are leaving. I moved your wife next door.'*

*The man said: 'This is not what I asked for.'*

*Lu said: 'How do you feel?'*

*The man said: 'Free of my burdens.'*

*Then the man became very happy. He thanked the sage and lived happily after that.*

*Blade of Grass, do not listen to what people say. Listen to what they mean.*

*This is a truth that all of nature knows.*

*Only humans do not know. A hungry puppy knows he needs food.  
But a hungry child thinks he needs toys.*

*The poet T'ang Yu said: 'Tears can be lies. The rain cannot.'*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'

by C F Wong, part 145.

Winnie Lim's heavily mascara-ed eyes blinked fully open. She clamped her perfectly manicured hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'C F,' she whispered. 'For you. Madam Fu.'

C F Wong's hand, which had been reaching for the phone, snapped sharply backwards on hearing the name of the caller. 'Say I am not here,' he said.

'He is not here,' said Winnie.

There was an asphyxiating silence in the office and a tinny version of Madam Fu's screechy voice could be heard erupting from the office administrator's phone.

'Okay, I tell him,' the young woman said.

Wong nervously picked at his lower lip. Winnie turned again to him. 'I tell her you are not here. She say she wan' to speak to you anyway.'

'Okay, okay.' The geomancer nodded and Winnie pressed a button which transferred the call 128 centimetres from her phone to his. He raised himself to his full 1.65 metres, and smoothed down his jacket.

'Hello, Madam Fu. Very nice to call me.'

'Wong? My cousin comes on Thursdays for tea. Every Thursday. That's why you must do it now.'

'Yes, Madam Fu.'

'Immediately, if possible.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'This afternoon or at the very latest tomorrow morning.'

'Yes, Madam Fu. What you want me to do this afternoon or tomorrow?'

'No, tomorrow morning. You have to have finished by the end of tomorrow morning. Sometimes she comes just after lunch. Better for you to

come now. For safety-lah.'

The geomancer decided to try a different tack. 'You have some bad luck recently, is it? Or new extension in your house? Something you want me to look at?'

'No, Wong, I want you to tell me whether I should take it away or have it thrown away or just leave it to rot. My cousin is very sensitive to these things.'

'But what? What is it?'

'The thing. I keep telling you. The thing in my garden.'

'In your garden. What sort of thing?'

'*Alamok!* That's what you have to tell me. I can't do your job for you, Mr Wong.'

Winnie Lim, who was listening on the other phone, put her hand over her mouthpiece and said to Wong: '*Aiyeeaa. Give up. Sudah-lah.*'

The geomancer realised the futility of continuing and ended the conversation with an obedient promise to drop everything and head to Fu Town Villa straight away. He put the phone down and then crashed into his seat with the grace of a warehouse being demolished.

His assistant, Joyce McQuinnie, lowered her book and looked over at him. She hadn't failed to notice his deep disinclination for the assignment. 'Why don't you just tell her to get stuffed?'

'Who?'

'Madam Thing.'

'Madam Fu.'

'Yes.'

'No, tell Madam Fu to get who?'

'Get stuffed. It's not a name. S. T. U. F. F. E. D. As in, have her internal organs removed by a taxidermist.'

'She does not believe in Western medicine. Only Chinese medicine.'

'Never mind.'

Once more, Wong felt that he was having a conversation with an unhinged person. Did everyone feel constantly surrounded by madness or was it just him? He decided to change the subject. 'The book. Good or not?'

Joyce was reading a volume of ancient Chinese myths and legends that he had proudly recommended to her. She threw it down. 'Well . . . to be honest, some of these are okay. But some are naff city.'



‘Hmm?’

She put her feet on the desk. ‘I mean, the girls always change into foxes or ghosts or something. That’s weird enough. But in this one, the guy changes into a chrysanthemum. I mean, puh-lease. A chrysanthemum? Who writes this stuff?’

‘P’u Sung Ling wrote it.’

‘He needs like a good script editor if he ever wants to break into movies.’

‘I think he does not. He is dead already.’

‘Yeah, well, not surprising.’

The geomancer was packing his bag. ‘I am going to see Madam Fu. Do you come?’ he asked, silently praying for an answer in the negative.

‘Sure,’ said Joyce. ‘A chance to see the loony upper crustaceans of Singapore society? I wouldn’t miss it for all the tea in Winnie Lim.’

The office administrator, hearing her name, momentarily lowered her eighteenth cup of gok-fa tea and glanced over at the speaker, but received no further information.



Suburban Singapore on a cloudy weekday in summer is a pleasant place. The traffic was snarled up in the centre of town, leaving the roads away from the business district clear, fast-moving and welcoming. The sky was an impossible shade of deep blue, made more rather than less beautiful by the white mountains of cirro-cumulus clouds standing over the horizon.

This was the sort of trip when Wong sometimes wished he had his own car. He watched rather enviously as free spirits in open-topped sports cars raced past, their hair whipping in the wind. But with tax on private cars in the city-state more than doubling their prices, it was out of the question for a small-businessman like himself.

On the other hand, if he were ever to save enough money for one, it would be through customers like Madam Fu. She was wealthy, required his services regularly, and paid in cash—usually more than he asked for. Putting up with a little madness was a small price to pay.

And, as for now, Singapore taxis were comparatively cheap and trustworthy—the one he was in at the moment was a Mercedes-Benz, a type

of car associated with the highest grade of cadre in his hometown of Guangzhou. It took them less than fifteen comfortable minutes to travel from Telok Ayer Street in town to the open, residential roads of Katong.

‘Probably be an easy job. She sounds like a mad old bat,’ said Joyce.

‘Rubbish,’ said Wong.

‘She’s not mad?’

‘No, rubbish. The problem, I think is rubbish. In her garden.’

Madam Fu’s house was in a high-class low-rise housing estate just off Meyer Road, better known as Condo Valley, but her back yard faced a quiet country road, often used for mildly nefarious purposes such as lovers’ meetings or for the disposal of trash, which would simply be thrown over her wall. To be even-handed, observers would have to say it was partly her own fault, since her garden was so poorly tended and overgrown that any passer-by would assume that it was common land. But as soon as one person dumped an old fridge on the spot, every passer-by would seemingly pay the garden a similar compliment. In a week, a single item could grow to an entire town-sized rubbish dump. Sometimes the initial discarded piece of household waste was placed by Madam Fu herself. She never blamed anyone for the resultant mountain of trash, appearing to believe that unwanted items of furniture multiplied by high-speed asexual conjugation.

Wong guiltily felt that this sort of assignment was not really the work of a feng shui reader. The woman was eccentric, or even mentally disturbed, and he thought she needed to be looked after the traditional Chinese way—hidden away by her children where she could do no harm.

But his visits, every few months, had become a regular part of her tranquillity, and had also become an appreciated part of his income, so why complain? Both sides got something out of it. Besides, there was a degree of psychology in every geomancy case. The energy flows inside a house, however perfectly arranged, will not produce a happy household if the dwellers in the building are in a state of disturbance.

They swung through the wealthy Joo Chiat neighbourhood, the favoured dwelling place of the old Eurasian and Straits Chinese communities. The houses here fascinated the geomancer. He particularly liked Mountbatten Road, with its grand bungalows in large grounds, some in the classical colonial style and others in bizarre modern designs.

Then the taxi arrived at a small, leafy, carefully isolated estate of detached houses. The taxi stopped at the main gate, the security guard looked at the occupants and quickly waved them through.

This is one purpose for which his Western assistant really proved useful, Wong mused. A wizened old Chinese gentleman with small wrinkled eyes and a down-turned mouth looked suspicious, and would do so even if he were in a Santa Claus suit. Yet there is something frightening about white females that terrifies Asian bureaucrats, whether they be doorkeepers or heads of state. He wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps it was the fact that they are so different from Asian females, definitely a separate and unrelated species. Western women were difficult, they were imposing, they were illogical, they lost their tempers so quickly and they screeched so readily. All these factors meant that one rather grumpy look from Joyce and the barriers were quickly raised, while Wong alone would have had to endure half a dozen questions and the production of some identification.

An Indonesian domestic helper opened the door of the whitewashed townhouse and led them to ma'am, who was standing in the back garden. 'Ah! Come, come,' Madam Fu said, beckoning them to follow her. 'This, I am sure, is bad luck for me, and I want to know what you think.'

Wong trod with care through the untended long grass. He had stubbed his toe painfully on a previous trawl through her garden and was taking no chances this time. They came to a halt at the back of the garden, just by the rear fence. Madam Fu pointed down in the long grass.

'There. What do you think?'

At her feet was a body. It was dead. It was wrapped in a raincoat with a dark stain on it. The flies buzzing on it suggested it had been there for at least half a day in the hot sun. It was a man with black hair. The eyes were open and unseeing.

Joyce screamed and put her fist to her mouth.

Wong breathed deeply. 'Aiyeaaa! I think you are right, Madam Fu. This is big bad luck. Needs to be dealt with pretty sharpish and no misprint at all.'

'I knew it,' she said proudly. She turned to the maid. 'Didn't I say this was bad luck?'

Wong decided he would have to ask her the obvious question. '*Terok-lah*. Er. Can I ask . . . er? Did you do this?'

‘Certainly not. I don’t kill people in my own garden,’ she said, as if she regularly committed indiscriminate slaughter at other locations.

The geomancer immediately summoned the police, who took over the investigation. After all, Wong said to himself, this was probably a gangland murder of some sort. Besides, he had an important job to do, reorganising Madam Fu’s fortune. The correct icons at the back door, facing the spot where the body was found, an eight-sided *ba gua* mirror on the wall above her french windows—it was not a difficult task to deflect the evil. He mused that people don’t realise that a single bad incident, even one as great as the placing of a murdered body on one’s premises, is less trouble to counter than a long-term flow of negative forces, such as the placement of a home in the direct line of a burial site.

The homicide investigator, a detective by the name of Gilbert Kwa, found Madam Fu difficult to deal with. She was illogical, confused and constantly contradicted herself. Wong found himself increasingly called upon to interpret what she said.

Kwa quickly started using Wong as a go-between to speak for, or get information out of, Madam Fu—a role to which the geomancer did not object, since his usual curiosity in such cases was piqued.

Later that day, the officer asked Wong to visit the police station. He asked him about the history of objects being dumped in the old woman’s garden. Wong explained that it appeared to be a symptom of the geography of the area. ‘It looks like a rubbish dump. So people put rubbish there.’

‘A body is not rubbish.’

‘True. Confucius said how to treat a dead body was a conundrum. You treat it like a dead thing. People say you have no heart. You treat it like he-she still a live person. People say you have no brain. Cannot win. Confucius in the *Li Chi*—’

‘We discuss Confucius another day, okay?’

‘Okay. Are you soon fingering a suspect?’

‘This is Singapore. We do not do such things.’

‘No. This is colloquial English phrase. Means finding the miscreant.’

‘Oh. I see. Well, already we got him,’ said Kwa.

‘Wah. So soon? Very good.’

The officer explained the full story. The dead man was Carlton Semek, an Indonesian businessman who had moved to Singapore four years ago. His

business partners had put him in the taxi on the corner of Tanglin Road after a meeting the night before his body was found.

His colleagues, a Singaporean named Emma Esther Sin and an American named Jeffrey Alabama Coles, said he was fine at the time they last saw him, except for having had a few drinks—not a huge amount, but perhaps three glasses of wine, which was enough to make him slightly tipsy. They put him into a taxi and waved goodbye. Both of them recalled that the taxi driver was an Indian-looking gentleman of indeterminate age. ‘He had black hair and a moustache,’ Emma Sin had said.

‘That narrowed it down to a shortlist of tens of thousands,’ Kwa said.

Fortunately, another part of the police team had been watching traffic and other security videos in the area, and came out with a number of vehicles which were in Katong and the Meyer Road area at the right time—including three taxis.

The drivers had been traced, and one appeared to fit the bill. Ms Sin and Mr Coles separately picked out the same photograph. The suspect’s log book showed a pick-up at the corner of Tanglin Road and Orchard Road at almost exactly the time when the murdered man’s colleagues said they put him into a taxi. The taxi driver was questioned by one of Mr Kwa’s colleagues and quickly confessed to dumping the body of the businessman over the wall of Mrs Fu’s house.

It sounded like a straightforward case. ‘Man gets in taxi alive,’ said Wong. ‘Man leaves taxi dead. Taxi driver killed him, right? Finish already.’

‘Ye-es,’ said the detective, and Wong heard the discomfort in his voice. ‘But not finished. It’s the details I need to wrap up. Contents of the man’s bag are gone. Money, yes, but also other stuff, scientific stuff he had on him. What did Motani—that’s the driver—do with that? How come got no murder weapon? We turned Motani’s flat upside down. Found nothing. Still long way to go before I close the book.’

‘Why so hurry?’

‘I like to get these things sorted out while a case is hot.’ He suddenly let his tense shoulders fall to a more comfortable position. ‘Also I’m supposed to be going on a golfing holiday, to Genting Highlands, at the weekend. Need to wrap up fast.’ He smiled.

‘Understand.’

‘My colleague Superintendent Tan tells me I should let you speak to the man. I’m inclined to do that. What do you think, *Sifu*?’

Wong knew this was as near as Gilbert Kwa would get to a direct plea for help, so he agreed to have an interview with the driver, a 27-year-old man named Nanda Motani, who had been working in the taxi business for a year.



‘I didn’t do it, I tell you I didn’t do it,’ said Motani with a pathetic note of pleading in his cracked and hoarse voice, even before Wong had sat down.

The feng shui man carefully changed the angle of his seat before lowering himself slowly into it. ‘Mr Motani, I do not say that you did anything. My name is C F Wong. I am consultant. I want to know the real truth. Please to tell me exactly what happened. Start from when you saw Mr Semek. Finish when you left him. Go slowly-lah.’

‘I didn’t kill him,’ said the driver. ‘He was dead already when I looked back.’

‘Please to tell me the full story,’ Wong said, trying to be reassuring but firm.

The man scratched his hairy cheeks, sighed, and then began. ‘So many times I have said this already. I turned into Orchard Road about 10.30, maybe a bit earlier, maybe a bit later. I saw these three on the street corner. They had come out of a bar. I could tell. The man in the middle was leaning against the woman, who was laughing loudly. The other man, the tall foreigner, was holding on to the man in the centre. I think they had all been drinking. They waved to me and I stopped. Technically it is not allowed to stop there. That I know. And if you want to arrest me and charge me for that, I will plead guilty. I will plead guilty a hundred times for that, just do not charge me with this . . . with this thing I did not do.’

‘Please continue. You stopped the car. And then . . . ?’

‘I stopped the car. The tall foreigner put the bags in and helped his friend in—the drunker one, while the woman was outside. Then he told me the address.’

‘Who told you the address?’

‘The tall one, the American one. “Katong, East Coast Road, near the Red House,” he said.’

‘Red House? Ah, you mean the old Katong bread shop?’

‘Yes, you know, the bakery. The drunk one was slumped a bit and the American reached into the car and sort of like patted him. “Bye, old buddy.” Something like that, he said. I did a U-turn into someone’s driveway—and if you want to arrest me and punish me for that, you can, please—and then I went down Orchard Road—’

‘East.’

‘Yes, east, you know, then down Stamford Road, Raffles Avenue, across the bridge. Then I took a wrong turn somewhere. I don’t know that side so well. I stopped, asked another driver which way. He told me, and I got to the Katong very fast, just only a few minutes later.’

‘Passenger say anything or not?’

‘No, he was too drunk. He repeated the address. I think I asked him something, made conversation, you know, I’m a very friendly guy, nice guy, I say something about Katong being a nice place to live, but he didn’t answer.’

‘He say anything?’

‘He sang a bit.’

‘What did he sing?’

‘I don’t know music, I have no time for music. I only know Tamil movie songs. He sang one of those old Western pop songs, you know, something about America or something, I don’t know.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘Nothing. Nothing at all. I just drove him, in the dark, to East Coast Road. I turn left into the road and I heard a noise behind. I looked in the mirror, couldn’t see him. I stopped, and saw that he had folded up, fallen over, partly into the foot well, partly on the seat. I drove on.’

‘Why you drive on? Did he not look sick?’

‘I tell you, Mr Policeman . . .’

‘I am not a policeman.’

‘I tell you, kind sir, when you are a taxi driver and you work the late shift, you many, many times take home people who fall asleep or who get drunk and unconscious. This is not unusual. You just take them home and

when you get to their address you wake them up. This happens many times, ask any Singapore taxi driver.'

'Okay. Then you came to his address?'

'Correct. That's when I tried to wake him. Anything I said, it didn't work. I reached over and shook him. It didn't wake him. He felt funny, loose. Then I got out of the car and went to the back to take him out of the car, leave him on his doorstep. I've done that before. But that's when I saw the stain on the coat. I thought he had been sick. But it was black.'

'It was blood?'

'Yes, I guess it was blood, but it looked black in the dark night. There was not much light there. When I realised he was sick or dead, well, I nearly screamed. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to get him out of the car, but what could I do? It felt like there were a hundred windows all round, all looking at me. I couldn't take the body out, in front of the windows. I thought about calling the police, but no one had had anything to do with this man except me. I thought the police might think I was . . . I was the killer. Which I wasn't. I wasn't, I wasn't, I wasn't. I tell you he was dead when I looked back.'

'Then you did what?'

'I closed his door, got back into my seat, and drove as fast as I could.'

'Where to?'

'Don't know. Just drove. Eventually, I found myself out in Meyer Road area, you know? I went down a dark lane near there, around the corner, and threw the body over a little wall. Also his bags. Briefcase and heavy bag.'

'Did you open?'

'No. Didn't touch. Only touched outside of bags, to carry them.'

'And after?'

'Then I took the car back home, cleaned, cleaned, cleaned it all night. I cleaned it and then repeated cleaning it and then did it again. I finished cleaning it at 6 a.m. in the morning and then went to sleep, slept for only a couple of hours. I was too scared to go back to work, so just sat at home, staring at the wall. I did that, for, I don't know how many hours. I did that until the police knocked at my door. They brought me here. I have been here ever since. That's all I know. Please believe me. Please, I ask you, beg you.'



‘I believe you,’ Wong found himself saying. ‘But must ask some questions. Car windows open or not?’

‘No, the windows were shut. I have air-conditioning. Don’t want to waste. Keep the cold in, you know?’

‘You hear Mr Semek open window? Hear any sound like him opening window or door or anything?’

‘I think no. I wish I could say something different because it would indicate that someone came in and killed him, which is what I believe happened. But I am a good Hindu man, Mr Policeman, and I do not tell lies, so I say I did not hear anyone opening any windows or doors, because that is the truth. Please, please, I hope you—’

‘Okay, finish-lah,’ said Wong.

The geomancer sat in the police canteen with a cup of green tea, studying copies of the paperwork of the case. Joyce arrived, carrying his books of astrological charts. He told her the details of the case, to see whether she would ask the right questions. ‘Weird,’ she said. ‘Who killed the guy if the driver didn’t? what happened on the journey that we don’t know about? The key is: what effect did the guy’s death have, right? Any inheritance or anything?’

Wong nodded. Correct question. It was one he had asked Kwa earlier that day. Semek had an ex-wife in Indonesia, and some children at college somewhere who would inherit his money—but no relatives in Singapore or Malaysia. The inheritance was not large, and as far as the police knew, there was no life insurance. As for business deals, Semek, Sin and Coles had just signed a development deal for a technical product. Something to do with ore analysis for use in mining in Kalimantan. Semek was a scientist, on the technical side of the deal, with Coles and Sin handling the business side, respectively being specialists in financing and marketing functions. The partners, who were badly shaken by the murder, had agreed to freeze the deal until after the funeral, when everyone involved would meet again and restructure it.

‘Like, anything interesting on the body of the dead guy?’

‘What is interesting is what was not on the body. He was carrying two bags when he got into taxi. One small briefcase. But also one big bag. Doctor-type bag. This contained rock samples, machine bits, foreign currency.’

‘And that’s gone?’

‘Not gone. The bag was still there. With the other one. Both in Madam Fu’s garden. But big bag was full of bricks. Like from building site.’

‘Ah, the switcheroo.’

‘Switch . . . ?’

‘It’s kind of a law in American movies. Old ones. You had to have a switcheroo. One bag with valuable stuff and another bag which looks the same, only has junk in it. The bag gets switched. They still have it sometimes. *Dumb and Dumber*.’

‘Yes. American movies dumber and dumber.’

‘So who took it? The driver, right?’

‘Maybe. Or if he stopped somewhere . . . Maybe there is something he is not telling us.’

‘What about the other bag?’

‘Full of usual businessman stuff, you know. Here’s the list.’

Joyce examined the sheet. Semek’s briefcase contained a huge number of pieces of paper, mostly technical documents to do with soil and rock analysis, the remnants of a doughnut in a paper bag, a Michael Crichton novel, a copy of *Penthouse* and a bag of peanuts from a SilkAir flight.

In his pockets the police had found a Finnish mobile phone, a local laundry ticket stamped with the word PAID, a bank ATM stub from a machine in Orchard Road, a dictaphone and a spare tape.

‘Did they play the tape?’

‘Yes,’ Wong told her. ‘Were two tapes. One had business letters on it. The other one had him singing.’

‘Singing?’

‘He liked singing. One tape starts with part of a business letter, Kwa says. Changes to him singing ‘New York, New York’. He was karaoke singer, understand or not?’

‘Yeuucchh. Yeah, I know karaoke. Where people murder songs in public.’

‘Don’t like? Dead man liked karaoke. Ms Sin said he often went to karaoke clubs.’

‘Any messages on the phone?’

‘None.’

The young woman picked up the list of personal possessions and suddenly whistled. Wong looked over. Had she spotted something important?

‘Wow. What happens to all his junk?’ she asked. ‘Do the police ditch it? I quite fancy the Dunhill lighter. Not that I smoke. And I could do with a new Walkman, and his tape machine is hot. Extra bass, built-in speaker, auto-reverse. I mean, if they were going to throw the stuff away.’

‘No. They give to family members.’

‘Oh yeah. I suppose that’s only fair. So what now? Pack the old bed pan and go feng shui the taxi?’

‘Not bed pan. *Lo pan*. What is bed pan? Anyway, compass no good in a car. Car always changes, south, west, north, east. Car has no direction itself.’

‘Mine does. Daddy bought me a 1989 mini to learn in a couple of months ago and I lost the keys and it was like, stuck on the side of the road for weeks. You know what a station wagon is? We used to call my car the stationary wagon. That’s a joke.’

‘With this case we need no *lo pan*. Only *lo shu* charts, pillars of destiny. First, Mr Semek.’

He opened his dusty volumes with enormous satisfaction and started reading through pages of Chinese characters. Mr Semek’s day pillar was fire and he was born in late spring, at a season of wood, the geomancer explained. He would get strength from fire and wood. Just like in a real fire, if you add more wood and more flames, the fire gets bigger. But if you add water on it, the fire will go out. If you put metal objects or earth on it, it will be difficult for the fire to burn.

The night he died was a day of metal, Wong said. Each element is associated with a part of the body. Mr Semek was shot in the chest. Metal is associated with the respiratory system. In this case, the astrological indications came true in the most literal way. A metal bullet went into his respiratory system.

Motani is also a fire person. However, there was only one wood element in his four pillars, but three metal elements. So he was not a strong fire person . . .

Gilbert Kwa strode over to the table. ‘Got anything?’

‘Yeah. It’s obvious, isn’t it, chief?’ said Joyce with smile.

‘It is?’ The police officer sat down opposite her.

‘Driver’s innocent. Someone shot the guy through the window of the cab. Long-range gun. Sniper style. With a silencer. Like in that movie *The Jackal*, you know? Remake of *The Day of the Jackal*. Good film.’

‘But the driver says the window was shut.’

‘Naah,’ said Joyce. ‘The driver said he stopped to ask directions. How do taxi drivers do that? Well, they wind down the window and shout, right? That’s when someone shoots the guy. The bullet whistles past the driver and kills the guy without the driver even noticing. Waddaya think?’

‘I think you watch too many movies,’ said Kwa, with a smile. ‘For a start, he wasn’t shot. He was stabbed. We saw the hole and the blood and no knife, and we first assumed a gun . . . but the doctor says he was definitely stabbed—by something like a kitchen knife or fruit-paring knife, short but sharp. We are searching Motani’s house again. Trouble is, could have thrown the thing out of the car window anywhere along the route.’

‘Oh. Does that change your theory?’ Joyce asked Wong.

‘No. Metal in respiratory system. Bullet, knife, the same.’

The young woman sat back and bit her index finger nail. ‘You know, I’ve got another idea. How about this? There was someone hiding in the trunk. He stabs the guy right through the back seat, yanks the knife out, then when the car stops, he jumps out and runs away. The car doors are never opened. Waddaya think?’

Kwa smiled. ‘Still you watch too many movies,’ he said. ‘Nice idea, but the victim was stabbed in the front. Right through the heart. Not the back.’

‘Well, at least I’ve got some interesting theories, which is more than you guys have,’ she said.

‘The answer is not in your movie ideas. Is somewhere on this desk,’ said Wong. He picked up the paperwork, opened his book of charts, and slotted the sheets in. ‘I go to my office. Sit quietly. Draw four pillars of fortune for each person. Must do the investigation properly.’ He stood up.

Joyce remained seated. ‘This is the first time I’ve been in a Singapore police station. Can you give me a tour, chief?’

‘Of course,’ said Kwa.

‘And can you show me where you lock people up and cane them and stuff?’

‘Also can-lah. Come.’



Early that evening, Joyce sat in a Starbucks on Orchard Road with a Coca-Cola and a blueberry muffin. She faced the road and looked at the shops on the other side of the street. Traffic flowed quickly, although there were periodic obstructions. Once, a taxi stopped suddenly to pick up a fare, and a van behind it skidded to a halt. A few curses were exchanged, and then both vehicles moved on. Somewhere in the distance, there was what sounded like a church bell ringing; an unexpected and very European sound, she thought to herself.

There was a Toys 'R' Us nearby. And around the corner was a large bookshop. In the boutiques on either side of the road, she saw the same designer clothes she had seen in South Molton Street. A young couple strolled past and sat at the table next to her; they were both wearing Levi's 501s: she recognised the tags.

Without consciously thinking it, her mind was pondering over the fact that the scene looked like Tottenham Court Road, or perhaps a main road in the Kensington area. Yet it could never be mistaken for such a spot. What made the difference?

The trees, she decided. Very oriental. English trees looked different from Singaporean trees. And the people of course. They were shorter. English people were tall, angular. And there weren't so many of them. Ten people on a London high street at once, and the pavements looked crowded. Here, there were always seventy people on the pavements, night and day.

And the air, of course. Although it was a cloudy, breezy day, and the sun had disappeared, the air remained hot, humid, unmoving. If this sort of weather hit London, it would be described as a heat wave. There would be topless sunbathing in Hyde Park, and reporters would be trying to fry eggs on the pavement. Here, people had put on their sweaters.

What other differences were there? She became suddenly aware that she was focusing on this mundane comparison because her mind didn't want to acknowledge what was really going on in her head. She was trying to block out something which had shaken her. She wasn't sure what it was.

But as she absently chewed on the muffin, she felt herself relaxing, and she gradually started turning over recent events in her mind. She had spent

a rather fruitless afternoon talking to members of Motani's family. His mother spoke little English, but was clearly devastated by the arrest of her oldest son. Then there were the four brothers and two sisters who still lived at home in the small apartment in a characterless housing estate called—called what? Already she had forgotten. The girls had been uncommunicative, and she had spent most of the time talking to two of the taxi driver's younger brothers. One was seriously good-looking, but was sullen, and spoke in monosyllables.

The other had a huge nose and wispy facial hair, but was animated and helpful.

She felt a fraud. She was trained in neither police work nor feng shui. What was she there for? What could she do? All Wong's instructions had been were to talk to the family and find out if there was anything they could tell her that would be helpful in resolving the case. She had no idea what to ask, or what information to record. Should she have taken notes? Should she have recorded the interview? At least that would have given her some air of professionalism. But then, they may have thought she was a reporter, after a scoop.

Was anything said that would be useful to relate to Wong? There had only been one topic of conversation during the time she had been in the house. And that consisted of repeated declarations that Motani was entirely innocent and how could the gods have got him into the situation?

When Joyce had explained that she wasn't a police officer, but was someone who wanted to help, they assumed she was a type of social worker, and asked a slew of questions about what welfare help they could get if Motani, the main breadwinner of the family, was locked up for years—not that he had committed any crime, of course.

She had surprised herself with her ability to answer some of their questions, and deflect the ones that baffled her. 'Where did I learn to bullshit so well?' she asked herself. Maybe it came naturally. Her dad was an expert, after all. Anyway, she had not brought any shame onto C F Wong & Associates, which was the main thing. She reckoned she had acted professionally enough—except, perhaps, for her impulsive request to borrow a bootleg CD of a Pearl Jam concert she saw on the desk that Motani's youngest brother was doing his homework on.

So why did she feel so shaken? She decided that it might be because she had soaked up a lot of the misery of the mother, who had drifted in and out of the room in tears throughout the afternoon. Or perhaps it was more than that; perhaps she had taken on some sort of moral responsibility for getting Motani free? Maybe that was why she felt like she was carrying a huge burden.

Or perhaps it was just all the events of the past few days that had left her in shock. Finding a corpse in the garden. That was the second corpse of the summer. So far. Not a lot of seventeen-year olds spend their gap year finding corpses. Perhaps I'm just like, growing up, she said to herself.

She had stopped for a drink to put off the main job of the afternoon, which was to report back to Wong what she had discovered. But she had discovered nothing. How could she communicate this to him? She called him on her mobile phone.

'CF? It's me. Jo.'

'You find flat okay?'

'Yeah, thanks. The cabbie took me right there.'

'You find anything?'

'Well . . . he's got this huge family. His dad's dead. He's the main breadwinner. He has loads of brothers and sisters. They're all really upset, of course. And . . .'

'And?'

'Well . . . that's it, really. I mean, I didn't find out anything to like, solve the mystery or anything. I didn't really know what to ask. Or what to look for. I just sort of talked to them.'

'Okay, no problem.'

'But there is one thing, I guess . . .'

'What thing?'

'We have to get him off. I mean, he didn't do it.'

'Why you think that?'

'No reason. I just do.'

'Understand. Me too. You go home now. Walk-walk slowly.'

She smiled. Emma had explained the Chinese equivalent of 'take care'.  
'Yeah. You walk-walk slowly too. G'night.'



Late the following morning, Wong found Gilbert Kwa in the corridor of the court house. The police officer was in a bad mood. 'Why oh why can't court cases be done on proper schedules, like dentists or doctors? Why do I have to spend hours hanging around like this?'

'I have an important question for you,' the geomancer said. 'Then maybe we will have answer.'

'Better be quick. We're charging Motani this morning. We're going to be called into court three any minute now. Or any hour now. Hard to tell.'

A clerk appeared at the door and read out a sheet of paper. 'Case 12/768-F. Motani, N.'

'I should have said any second now. Sorry, we're on. Talk to you after.'

'No. Wait, Mr Kwa. One question: was it raining Tuesday night? I slept early. I don't know. But very important.'

'No, if I remember, it rained in the afternoon, but was dry in the evening, okay? Sorry, Wong, I have to go in now.' The officer started to move towards the door of court three.

'Wait. I have something important.'

'Got thirty seconds only, C F. Judge Simeon Malik is on today. He keeps everyone waiting but no one can keep him waiting.'

The geomancer took a deep breath and started his explanation. 'The main thing is that Motani is a weak fire person who needs wood to give him strength. On the night of the killing, his pillars were bad. There was a clash between metal and wood. Also a clash between wood and earth. But the hour pillar of the death shows strong support of wood to Motani's fire. If water was present—if it had rained at that time, then very bad for Motani. But no rain. Only wood. This means that what happened at that hour was not destruction of Motani's life. Only part of the cycle. He will not be locked up. He will be released.'

'*Sudah-lah*,' said the officer. 'Thank you and goodbye.' He stepped towards the door of the court.

'There is another thing. Semek was dead before he met Motani.'

'What?' Kwa stopped. 'What do you mean? Proof, please.'



‘Semek was stabbed on the street. His friends carried body to taxi. He was not drunk. Dead. Big American put Semek into the car. Propped him up.’

‘But he—Semek spoke to the driver—told the driver the address even.’

‘American reached into the car. Switched on a tape recorder. In Semek’s pocket. Contained the sound of a voice saying Mr Semek’s address. Then a gap. Then later a voice humming song called New York.’

‘“New York, New York”.’

‘Yes.’

Kwa’s legal assistant approached. ‘Gilbert. We’ve been called. Come on.’

‘Wait,’ said the police officer.

Wong continued: ‘This is designed to make everyone think he dies later. On cab journey. Even the taxi driver thinks he dies later. Later police examine body. Then tape player has switched itself off. Auto rewind. You play tape. Hear a voice saying an address. You think is the start of dictating a letter. You think nothing strange. You listen to the tape more. You hear voice singing. Mr Semek is big karaoke fan. You think nothing strange.’

‘What about the bag? With samples and cash?’

‘Bag never had samples and cash. Always was full of bricks. To prop him up. Keep him straight in taxi.’

‘You think his partners killed him? But why? What would they have to gain from it? He was the only one with no money.’

‘They are venture capital people. He is ideas man. They don’t want his money. They got money. They want his idea. Maybe they don’t want to pay him.’

Kwa turned to his colleague: ‘Tell the prosecutor to approach the judge. Ask for an adjournment. We’re not ready.’

Joyce McQuinnie, who had been talking to Winnie Lim on the phone in another part of the court house, arrived in the corridor. ‘Hi. Winnie says you got a call this morning from Madam Fu again.’

‘More rubbish in garden?’

‘No. Her cousin came for morning coffee, stayed an hour. The old bat reckons her cousin left some bad vibrations there sort of thing. Wants you to come and do her house again.’

Wong nodded. ‘Better go. Just in case. We can take taxi again. Singapore taxis quite safe.’



## 9 An imperfect enclosure

*Five hundred years ago a great spirituality came to the west of Beijing. This was a time when tangible gave way to intangible. There was much magic.*

*Every day a bowl would fly from the holy temple to the Imperial Palace. Spirits would carry it. They were unseen. Empress Li would put alms in it. It would fly back to the temple.*

*One morning the Empress was not ready. She was in her nightdress. The bowl came into her room. She was half-awake only. She covered herself up. She made a joke.*

*‘What do you want so early? Five hundred girls for your 500 monks?’*

*The bowl flew back to the temple. It did not come the next day.*

*The Empress realised she should not have made this joke. She wrote a letter to the head of the temple. His name was Tao Fu. She told him what she did.*

*Tai Fu said: ‘There is only one thing you can do. You must send 500 girls for the 500 monks. Then you will not have insulted the spirits. There will be no untruth.’*

*So she sent staff to find 500 girls. After a long time they found enough. The girls were sent to the village of Shih Fu. This is near the temple. The 500 men and 500 women could not stay so close together without sin. They were tempted. They came together.*

*Tao Fu did not know what to do. The punishment for this sin was death. He decided he had to do it. He took the 500 monks and 500 girls and surrounded them with fire. They lit the fire to burn them to death.*

*But the Immortals were looking. They lifted the 500 couples straight to the Highest Heaven. They became saints. Tao Fu took the bed of Empress Li and made it into an altar.*

*Blade of Grass, from this incident a great truth became understood. The holy man who gives up love for his whole life is a pleasure to Heaven. But the holy man who gives up his whole life for love is also a pleasure to Heaven.*

From 'Some Gleanings of Oriental Wisdom'

by C F Wong, part 287.

CF Wong put his journal away and picked up the day's mail, which consisted of a single letter. As usual, there had been an armful of communications jammed into the C F Wong & Associates pigeon-hole downstairs. And as usual, most had been envelopes with windows (put into a drawer to await the weekly accounting session), phone number cards from taxi companies (binned), and items of junk mail (ceremonially burned in a bid to wreak a small karmic vengeance on the senders).

The geomancer examined the outside of the single example of genuine correspondence and gave an unhappy sigh. This, surely, meant trouble. The envelope bore the crest and marks of Master Dinh Tran of the Buddhist Vihara of St Sanctus, a man whose oddly cross-cultural title bore witness to the mixed history of his temple, built in south Vietnam on the site of a former Roman Catholic church.

'Oh well, better eat the bullet,' Wong said half out loud before tearing open the envelope and scanning the contents. The lines around his eyes grew visibly deeper as his gaze rolled down the page. 'Aiyeaaaa,' he breathed. 'Terok-lah! AiyeAAA.'

In the letter, Master Tran, a friend of Wong's late father, requested the feng shui master's urgent presence to deal with a complex problem. He must come now. The temple was willing to provide a fee equivalent to one

day's consultation to East Trade Industries. No mention was made of air tickets or accommodation. Presumably he would be housed in a Spartan room inside the temple complex. The offer of payment was academic anyway, because East Trade Industries would gallantly refuse to take any money in a case such as this. There were enough superstitious people on the board to ensure that, as Master Tran well knew. All in all, it was almost guaranteed to be a tricky and unprofitable way to spend a few days.

Wong tossed the letter to his assistant, Joyce McQuinnie, who was watching with curiosity.

'I'm going to walk the streets again,' he said.

'Hit the road again,' corrected Joyce, after a moment's thought. She looked at the stamp on the letter. 'Vietnam! I'm coming with you. If Daddy lets me.'

'Yes,' Wong said absently, his mind already travelling. It could be all right. There was something other-worldly about Vietnam that sometimes uplifted his spirits, although Saigon itself could be depressing. And he had a cousin in Cholon he could see. Perhaps he could take a day or two off, do some meditation? It had been, what, eight or nine years since he had spent any serious time in a temple? He recalled how refreshed he had been after a week of quiet contemplation in a temple lodge in Chiang Mai. Or hang on, was he thinking of the free holiday he had received while doing the feng shui for that new five-star resort in Nusa Dua?



Master Tran did not have a phone or a fax machine, so Winnie Lim had to use the temple's agent, a Thai import-export man carrying the unmelodious name Porntip, to inform the holy man that the geomancer would arrive on the Tuesday of next week for one day and one night, and would be accompanied by an assistant.

'Didn't know temples used like, feng shui guys,' said Joyce.

'Why not? They are buildings too.'

'Yes, but they are a different type of thingie, I mean, well, a different type of—I don't wanna say superstition, but you know what I mean.'

‘Different mumbo-jumbo,’ said Wong, recalling the word she had used on her first awful day in the office. It had a nice sound. He must look it up. Derived from the English slang word for the Boeing 747?

‘I mean, can’t they, like, just pray to God and stuff and get him to fix whatever their problem is?’

‘They are Buddhists. They don’t believe in God.’

‘Well, Allah or Buddha or the Great Pumpkin or whatever they worship, you know.’

Wong nodded. He didn’t know how to explain it to her in English, but this was exactly the reason why he disliked doing feng shui readings in temples or churches or any holy places. They were already so full of unseen influences that his job was infinitely more difficult. An altar which had been worshipped by thousands of souls over tens or hundreds of years, might have a great deal of stored ch’i energy, despite being in entirely the wrong place in feng shui terms.

Another difficulty was that holy men of any sort generally imagined themselves to be highly advanced in the spiritual arts, although many were extremely shallow. This meant they rarely paid more than lip service to the advice of masters of what they thought were lesser arts, such as geomancy. It was true that Master Tran had always had a healthy respect for feng shui, but Wong feared the existence of hostile skeptics among other temple personnel.

There was another thing. God or Allah or Buddha or—what did Joyce say? The Great Pumpkin? He must look that one up—might actually be there. He recalled once doing some private readings at an old church and encountering a terrifyingly powerful presence which had left him exhausted and disorientated. He recalled the words of Confucius, memorably quoted by the Tang Dynasty sage Han Yu: ‘Pay all respects to spiritual beings but keep them at a distance.’

‘Temples always difficult. Also big. And only one day. It will be difficult assignment.’ He put his fingers on his own temples and closed his eyes.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Joyce. ‘I’ll help. A friend of mine bought a fantastic CD case in a Saigon market—it’s sort of like basket-weave but in neon colours—and I want to see if I can get one. It would be kind of fun to stay in a monkey-house for a while. It’ll be all guys, won’t it? A hundred guys in bedsheets and me, totally rad.’

‘Monkey-house?’ asked Wong.

‘Yeah, monkey-house,’ said his young assistant. ‘Place where monks hang out. Not to be confused with “monastery”, which is the technical word for a building at the zoo where the monkeys are kept.’

Wong wrote it down. What a strange language English was.



Stepping out of the airport in Ho Chi Minh City was like entering the world’s biggest convection oven. There was a light breeze blowing, but rather than cooling the skin, the wind seemed to blast heat at them.

‘Wow. I won’t need a hairdryer,’ Joyce said. She watched amazed as an ice cream in the clutches of a small girl next to them melted in seconds and poured out of her hand. The young woman removed her denim jacket, being careful not to displace her earrings, a gold stud from Sri Lanka from which dangled a tiny holographic picture of a seated Buddha.

As is the case outside most Asian city airports, there was a bewildering mass of people standing around, and no obvious way of differentiating one party from another. How would they find who they were looking for? But seconds later, a tiny, brown, bird-like man in a floral print shirt scuttled up to Wong and shook his hand firmly. ‘CF, hello, hello, welcome to Vietnam. I haven’t seen you for a long time. Seven-eight years maybe?’

The geomancer nodded and bowed and then introduced the newcomer to Joyce. Porntip’s glee vanished like a popped soap bubble. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, no, no, no,’ he said, sharply withdrawing the hand that he had proffered in her direction. ‘I’m sorry . . .’ He looked back at Wong. ‘She’s a woman,’ he complained.

‘Yes,’ said Wong. ‘A woman.’

‘She’s not a man. She’s a woman.’

Joyce, irritated, grabbed the front of her skirt as if she were offering to lift it up. ‘Would you like to have a look and make absolutely sure?’ she asked.

‘No need,’ said Porntip.

‘Not necessary,’ said Wong.

In the car on the way to the temple, Wong and Porntip discussed the problem. Wong had apparently forgotten or had never realised how strict the temple was on the subject of women. It was rare for females to be allowed through the gates at any time of the day or night, the Thai businessman said, and one would never be allowed to stay the night.

‘No women at all, ever?’ asked Wong.

‘There is an open day once or twice a year, and then women can come, but only if they make a big donation or give presents, you know?’

‘When?’

‘May. The Lord Buddha’s birthday. Vesak. Also Dharma Day, Sangha Day.’

‘Fine,’ said Joyce. ‘I’ll just wait outside until May.’

‘Cannot. We are only here for one night,’ Wong explained.

Not for the first time, Joyce lamented the lack of irony in conversations in Asia.

The driver of the ageing Nissan was Porntip’s nephew, a chain-smoking young man of about sixteen, who went by the single name of Bin. He had left his window open and the temperature of the air rushing through the car varied from cool to searing, depending on its speed. After about forty-five minutes, the car hit the outskirts of Saigon proper, and slowed to a crawl. Porntip wound the window up and switched on a noisy and ineffective air-conditioner.

The little man had not aimed a single word at Joyce, and refused to catch her eye, despite the fact that when he turned around from his front passenger seat to talk to Wong, who was directly behind him, his line of sight ran past her.

‘Why no women can come?’ asked Wong.

‘They had a monk there who turned out to be a sex-change person,’ said Porntip. ‘When they found out, they threw him, er, her, out, of course. I think that was the last time they had a woman inside.’ He lowered his voice confidentially. ‘She was one of those, you know, third sex people.’

‘Yes, I know. In Singapore we have them too. We call them homo sapiens. They go to nightclubs. But in Singapore mostly are men.’

‘Yes. But sometimes there are women like that. Very perverted.’ Porntip gave that strange Thai laugh that signifies embarrassment rather than humour. ‘Women and women together,’ he added in a horrified whisper.

‘Have read about them. Pervert women. Short hair. In Singapore, they are known as Lebanese,’ said the geomancer.

‘Lesbians,’ Joyce inserted.

‘Yes, Lesbianese. Anyway, when did this happen? The sex-change monk?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe five-six years ago.’

Joyce, who was still seething, remarked that the temple did not seem to be very well up on the present understanding of the rights of transsexuals or transvestites or whatever the person might have been. ‘It doesn’t seem very religious to me to discriminate against people with a different sexual orientation,’ she said.

Wong gave her a long, hard look before replying. ‘Joyce please to remember. This is Asia. Those sort of people have no rights.’

Twenty minutes later, they were out onto the open road, and an hour of more restful driving into the rural areas brought them to the gates of the Buddhist Vihara of St Sanctus, in a tiny hamlet close to the village of Tho, southeast of Saigon.

Porntip told them to leave the bags in his car, while their arrival was announced. Wong answered several questions from Joyce about the organisation. The vihara was more like a convent than a standard temple, he said. It was closed to the public and its members were kept in a state of isolation. Nor was it involved in the sort of high-turnover ‘conscript’ Buddhism sometimes found in South-East Asia, where young men spend a couple of years as monks as part of their upbringing.

Just looking at it, Joyce could tell that this was a rural Zen Buddhist temple of a really old school. It was a large, prison-like compound. High, windowless walls in a muddy red colour framed a heavy wooden door with wrought iron fittings. You entered to escape the world, and some monks never left except in a box when they were dead, Wong had told her. ‘Scary,’ she had replied.

There was no need to knock. As soon as they approached, a small opening, about 6 inches square, slid open in the door. A pair of dark eyes glanced momentarily at Wong and then looked sharply and intensely at McQuinnie. The look was not one of lust, but fear. The little metal opening was slammed shut.



Nothing happened for a while. It was hot. Joyce was aware of her heart beating and her clothes being damp. The air felt clammy on her skin. The surroundings were quiet compared to Saigon. The boy Bin now kept staring at her. For some reason, she didn't mind.

Six minutes and thirty-three seconds later, they heard footsteps again. The little opening slid open with a metallic scrape. A male voice started talking in Vietnamese. Porntip replied.

For the next few minutes, there were complex and high-octane negotiations between Porntip and the face behind the door. During this, the Thai businessman and the small, squat face in the door gave several pointed glances at Joyce. Porntip was evidently trying to get permission for the young woman to enter on the grounds that she was a professional consultant. They could tell from his hardened face at the end of the discussion that the outcome had been unsuccessful.

'He says we and Bin can go in, but not the child.'

She blinked. 'You don't mean me?'

'Yes, he means her,' Porntip said.

'I am a woman of nearly eighteen years old,' she spat, her forehead turning into an angry map of lines. 'THAT is a child.' She gestured at Porntip's short, tousle-headed nephew, who looked very much younger than she did.

'Adolescence for women continues until twenty-four according to the tradition of this house,' said Porntip. 'Boys become adults at thirteen. I'm sorry, she is a woman and child, so she won't be able to enter.'

'That's so dumb,' snapped Joyce.

'Why don't you go shopping? There are some very nice tourist shops about an hour's drive from here,' said Porntip. 'I can give you my nephew to guide you if you like.'

This was a bad idea on Porntip's part, Wong knew. If there was anything Joyce McQuinnie hated, it was the assumption that she was a shopping addict—particularly since it was true.

'I didn't come here to shop,' she lied, icily.

'No time for that. Got your *lo pan* and books?' Wong asked, taking her arm and pointing to the distance. 'I do in side of the temple grounds and you do outside. Many, many influences here, I can see. Look at those trees.'

And that pointed thing there. You have a lot to do, Joyce. You will be more busy than me even. We meet again here in two hours. Okay or not?’

‘Yeah, guess so,’ she said, partly mollified by being taken seriously. She accepted the notebook he handed her.

‘Ask Mr Porntip to go with you, okay or not?’

‘No, I’ll be okay by myself, thank you.’

‘Bin can help. See you in two hours.’

Bin tilted his head to one side and gave her a toothy grin. ‘You like pirate CDs?’ he said. ‘Original artist, only 2 US dollars. Also software. Windows Office latest one. Tomb Raider III. Movies.’

‘Where?’ said Joyce.

‘Follow,’ said Bin.



Wong stepped through the door and was welcomed by a bulky man in a robe. The inside of the temple grounds were very similar to the modern Vietnamese temples he had seen tourists swarm all over—the only difference was that the tourist traps seemed more holy. More money flowed around and through them, and there was more motivation to make them visually conform to expectations, Wong mused. In contrast closed holy houses such as this were clean, dull and rather featureless.

His escort, who introduced himself as Brother Wasuran, explained that Master Tran had been summoned to a meeting of a Buddhist organisation in Saigon and would not be back until the evening or even the following morning.

‘Never mind,’ said Wong. ‘Always a great pleasure to spend time in a monkey-house like this.’

Although not attractive, the premises were functional. There was a large central courtyard with the objects of veneration in a building in the centre. The middle of the space was shared with a large bo tree, said to have been grown from a sprig of the tree under which Siddharta Gautama had sat. Over to the west was a rather dry, dusty garden, and to the east and the north were some rows of low buildings where the monks’ sleeping cells

were. A training block stood to the south, and just next to it were the offices and the private rooms of the senior monks. Everything was a faded red.

‘Already can see problems,’ said Wong, peering into one of the cells of the northern sleeping block. ‘Sleep rooms are in north of grounds. They are entered by door facing northeast. But beds are pointing south. All this not a good combination. North is good for bedrooms for man and wife. Good for sex. But very bad for monks with no woman. I think can fix. Definitely have to move beds. Also maybe move door to sleeping block. And paint colour is no good. Must change. All paint colours.’

The geomancer stepped towards the middle of the courtyard and cast his eyes around again, then tapped his *lo pan*. ‘Also, garden in the west. I think that was not there before, is it?’

‘No, there used to be a shed for the carts there, but it fell down. We cleared it and turned it into a vegetable garden about two years ago,’ said Brother Wasuran, a rotund man of about forty, with a raspy voice and a neanderthal brow.

‘Plants are alive. Have very special sort of energy. Must be placed carefully. Can be very good. But now are in southwest. This is direction of soil ch’i. Not so good. Need make some changes there also.’

Wong was busy scratching notes into his pad when it occurred to him that he had not asked whether there was a specific issue which had to be resolved. Master Tran had explained in his letter that he was worried about ‘a general air of malingering and delinquency’, neither of which were words he understood, even after looking them up. ‘Is there some big problem I must fix?’ he asked. ‘What did Master Tran want me to do?’

‘There are lots of problems. He did not tell me exactly what to tell you. I think generally there is some unhappiness among the brothers. Twice we have found liquor bottles hidden in dark places. Once we found a magazine showing shocking indecent pictures and writings about, you know, man-woman relations and such things. We also found a case of 2000 cigarettes, and a television machine, you know, what do you call it? A video machine? We could not work out how it had come into the vihara, because the brothers do not go in and out very much, and we keep a careful watch on the door at all times.’

‘I see. Have many problems.’

‘There are other problems. We have many rats in the temple now. Hard to sleep. They live in the roof, run, run at night, very noisy,’ he rasped.

Wong made careful notes. He spoke to Wasuran as he scribbled. ‘Harmony is very important. Hsun Tzu said: “The stars go round; the sun and moon shine in turn; the four seasons come one after another; the *yin* and the *yang* go through their changes; wind and rain are widely distributed; all things acquire harmony and have their lives.”’

‘It is so.’

‘Your problems: any more?’

‘Yes. I think Master Tran was worried because three men asked to leave. They want to stop being brothers, get married, they say. We think one of them must have brought the video machine and the bad magazine into the place, but no one admits it.’

‘What name?’

‘The men?’

‘No. The magazine.’

‘It was called *Australian Women’s Weekly*. Many things about love and conjugal things. Shocking.’



CF Wong and Joyce McQuinnie spent the afternoon working at a dining table in a nearby restaurant. After Porntip had introduced them as consultants working for the vihara, the owner was happy to attract good karma by letting them use the place in the lull between the midday and evening rush periods.

The assignment was turning out to be an enjoyable challenge. Joyce had bought some CDs, which put her in a good mood, and then efficiently mapped out the area surrounding the temple. She had discovered some major elements that needed to be taken into consideration: a village well, due south of the temple, a coffin shop to the northeast, and an electricity pylon, almost facing the front gate, albeit a long way off.

Wong carefully described the inside of the temple grounds to his assistant. He drew diagrams to explain each block’s relation to the other,

and tried to describe the condition of the buildings. 'It not too beautiful, but it is very span and spic,' he said.

'Spic and span,' said Joyce.

'Spic and span, span and spic, what difference?' Wong complained.

'Good question. Never mind. What else?'

Joyce was particularly intrigued by the stories of the video recorder, cigarettes and a magazine being smuggled into the building. 'It has no windows that you can like reach from the ground, so the guys must have hidden them under their robes. The magazine I can understand, but a video—that must be tough to tuck into your underpants.'

'Monks are not wearing underpants, I believe.'

'I really wouldn't know, and don't expect to find out on this trip.'

Wong drew large and indecipherable maps showing the objects he considered key, immovable elements: the well, the bo tree, the outer walls and main buildings of the vihara.

Then he sketched in signs and symbols using his *lo pan*. He knew Joyce was frustrated that he wrote in Chinese characters, but was darkly aware his written English might contain embarrassing mistakes. The animal signs for each direction were then drawn in, with each given 30 degrees of the compass, starting from dragon in the north to snake in the northwest.

After consulting his old books, all of which were in Chinese, and drawing several *lo shu* diagrams, Wong started to formulate a plan. He explained it to Joyce, who wrote it out in carefully correct English, for delivery to the guardians of the temple tomorrow morning.

At four o'clock, Joyce revealed she was bursting to go on a serious shopping trip. By this time, she had made firm friends with Porntip's nephew. Bin was clearly awestruck by her presence, and she shamelessly exploited this, using him as a personal tour guide.

'Bin's taking me shopping. I'll be back in a few hours. Where am I sleeping tonight?'

'You sleep here in Porntip's house,' said Wong. 'I go back to temple now. Check our maps. I need to talk to Brother Wasuran. I sleep there. In case Master Tran returns. I will come here tomorrow. Meet you for breakfast.'

'What time?'

'Seven o'clock; okay or not?'

'Seven! Way too early. Can't we make it eight or nine?'

‘Monks will be awake at five o’clock already. Our flight at 10.50. Must leave to go to the airport at nine or 9.30.’

‘Okay, okay, seven it is. Jeez.’ She turned her full attention to Bin. She gave him a bewitching smile and draped one arm carelessly over his shoulder. ‘I need like a basketweave CD case. For my Discman, you know? There’s one that holds six CDs but my friend Melissa says you can also get one that holds twelve CDs and it has a headphone pocket.’

The love-struck Bin nodded and led her to the car.



By eight o’clock, darkness was falling, and the Vihara of St Sanctus was silent, except for odd scuttling noises, which Wong knew must be the rats. He tried to settle in his room, which was as bare and unappealing as a prison cell. His physical discomfort was partly compensated for by his feeling of emotional satisfaction. By making some relatively small physical changes, and altering the uses of several blocks, he was sure he could bring about major improvements to the feng shui of the monkey-house. He was convinced this would be quickly detectable, and gain him goodwill in the next world if not hard cash.

He placed his oil lamp on the small table and pushed the bed to a different angle, so the top of his head would be pointing towards the north.

As he settled down for the evening, he mused on his love-hate relationship with holy places. How could a feng shui master not be intrigued by places which had been devoted to unseen influences for centuries? Yet implementing changes in religious centres had always been difficult in the past. He would give the man in charge a list of changes which needed to be made, and they would make some of them on the spot, and make pledges to change the rest after he had gone. But he would probably not be invited back for an inspection and a salting, or closing ceremony. He would generally be left to hope that they did what he had suggested, and did not overrule his instructions. There was a lot of jealousy in mysticism, he decided. Once one gets some talent for sorting out the unseen influences on life, others who claim some ability in the same field quickly start to exhibit the worst sort of professional jealousy. Still, Master

Tran had invited him to visit. What could be done? And he felt at peace. He had done his job well. He was in a house of spirituality. And it was good for him to be with monks, away from negative influences such as business-people, women and so on.

Wong had guessed there would have been no supper for the monks, so had spent much of his afternoon packing himself full of snacks, and had not complained when he had been sent to bed with neither food nor drink. He had also sneaked in a packet of a British delicacy to which he had become acquainted in Hong Kong—chocolate-covered Hobnob biscuits.

For some time, he lay awake in the pitch darkness, unable to sleep. At first, he was not aware that his mind was not drifting off to sleep in the normal way. It was only after an hour of re-arranging his limbs on the hard bed that he realised that he was failing to nod off.

What was keeping him awake? The room was dark, as there were no artificial lights on anywhere in the Vihara, and few street lights in the roads nearby. Also, there was virtually no sound. He was dimly aware of a cricket buzzing in a tree somewhere outside his tiny window, and twice he heard an owl hooting. Earlier in the evening, he had heard faint scratching noises in his room, which he assumed was the sound of the rats of which Brother Wasuran had complained. But even they seemed to have gone to sleep now. As he concentrated on the near-silence, he became faintly aware of the sound of recorded music, but it seemed very far away—certainly outside the boundaries of the temple, and probably somewhere in the nearby town. He opened his eyes wider, and noticed a slight gleam of moonlight shining through his window shutters, reflecting on the edges of the few items of furniture in the room. His stomach rumbled, and he wondered if he should get up and eat a biscuit. But it would be difficult to find the packet. He wondered absently whether he had zipped up his bag, and whether the snacks would be safe from the rats. This thought in his mind, he drifted into an uneasy sleep.



He was suddenly awoken by a loud scraping sound in the ceiling. Another rat. But this one sounded huge! There was silence for a moment, and then

there was another scratching sound. He heard the wooden boards creak. He looked up and watched with horror as the planks bulged downwards with the weight of the creature or creatures in the ceiling. Suddenly, a plank was moved aside and a shadowy face appeared in the blackness.

Wong gasped and recoiled.

‘Surprise,’ said Joyce’s voice. Moments later, the young woman lowered her face into the light. ‘Don’t just stand there. Like, get me something to climb down on. That chair! No, the table. Can you move that table?’

‘What you are doing here?’ he snapped.

‘Get me down and I’ll tell you,’ she said.

He moved the oil lamp onto the chair and, with a grunt, lifted the table so that its legs would not scrape along the floor. He placed it as quietly as he could under the opening. ‘Here. Okay or not?’ He spoke in a nervous whisper.

‘Yeah, that’s right. Ow! Sorry. Just got a huge splinter. Look, move it to the right a bit. Yeah. Okay.’

With remarkable agility she dropped through the small hole on to the table—which promptly collapsed, sending her crashing to the floor.

‘Shoot,’ she said. ‘Right on my bottom. Oww. Jeez.’

‘Hurt or not?’

She winced, rubbed her lower back and rose slowly. ‘No no, I’m fine, only my pride et cetera.’

Wong’s eyes darted nervously to the small window. It would be disastrous if any of the brothers thought he had deliberately smuggled this young woman into the premises. Her femaleness would taint the atmosphere. They may all have to flee. Worse still, she was in his bedroom and night had fallen. He would be assumed to have improper motives. If this got out, he may not receive his annual bonus from East Trade. Thankfully the curtain was drawn, and the night seemed to be as quiet as before.

Then there was sharp knock on the door. He took in his breath sharply.

‘Ye-es?’ Wong asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘Are you all right?’ It was the gruff voice of Brother Wasuran. ‘I heard a noise. Did you fall?’

Wong gestured frantically at Joyce to hide under the bed. But she leapt onto the chair. The geomancer’s eyes popped. What was she doing? Was



she going to climb back up? Then he realised that she was carefully sliding the plank back into place. This achieved, she hopped off the chair, placed it to one side, and rolled under the bed.

‘Fine, fine. Everything okay. Only table broken. No problem please.’

‘Oh, let me fix. I am coming in, please.’

The door had no lock, so Wong had no choice. Checking that his assistant was not visible, he opened the door and Brother Wasuran pushed his way in.

‘Oh, the table has broken, very sorry,’ the monk grated.

‘No, I am sorry,’ said Wong. ‘My arms are heavy. Maybe I am pressing on it too hard.’

Brother Wasuran looked with puzzlement at the geomancer’s skeletal limbs. ‘No matter. I’ll bring you a new one. Very sorry. Very bad.’

Wong held his breath until the fat man had left the room. A full five minutes passed before the monk returned with a new table. During this time, Joyce slid her head out to get some air, disappearing again when Brother Wasuran was heard waddling down the wooden aisles of the sleeping block. Then the monk stayed and chatted for another three or four minutes before bidding goodnight. When the door was shut, Wong enjoyed half a minute’s perfect peace, and then heard Joyce extricating herself from her hiding place.

‘Phew. Dusty under there. I was worried I was gonna sneeze. That would have dropped you in it. Teenage bimbo under bed. In a monkey-house too. What a laff!’

‘Not funny,’ said Wong in a stern whisper. ‘Please to keep voice quiet. Why you here? You should go. Should not be here. No women allowed. Is a rule.’

‘Hey, cool it, boss man. You should be thanking me. I just solved the mystery. Don’t you wanna know how I got here?’

There was only one chair, so Joyce steered her boss into it and stood next to him, pointing out her discoveries on his map.

‘Look. See this part here? I spent hours looking for an opening in the wall. It’s plaster at the front, but just fencing on this side and at the back. I prodded every plank, every fence post, all the brick bits, and there wasn’t any section that like, opened up. But then I noticed that some of the bricks were sort of depressed into the wall, round the back, do you know what I

mean? Just enough room for someone's toes. So I tried climbing up. There were more little holes in the bricks above—designed just right for someone climbing up.'

'This is dangerous. Anyone see you?'

'Naah, I was really careful. Bin was look-out. He turned out to be a real okay kid. Anyway, this was at the back, where there isn't much traffic. It was getting dark. So I nipped up. About 10 feet up, the brick wall becomes a wooden fence. I just pressed the fence and it swung open. It was a secret opening. Totally cool. And I'd found it by myself just like that.'

'Please to keep your voice quiet.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'll be quiet, sorry. Anyway, listen. This is interesting. The fence bit opens up on top of the inner building here in the courtyard. What is this, some sort of garage?'

Wong looked at the shaded area on the map. 'That is eastern altar. Smaller gold Buddha in there.'

'Yeah, right. Anyway, I stayed quietly on the roof for a while. The building doesn't connect with any other building, so I didn't know what to do. It was kind of fun being on the inside of the temple without anyone knowing, so I just stayed where I was, lay down on my tummy and watched you all. Some of the younger ones are real hunks. I don't suppose you can introduce me to the tall one . . . ? No, okay, okay. I watched you going into your room. It was really funny.'

'You could get us into big trouble. You should not do this.'

'Oh, stop being so cross. This is a big discovery, I'm telling you. You see, I realised how people broke in and out and smuggled things. Several of the branches from the big tree come across to the roof of the place where I was. When it got a bit darker I climbed into the tree—now that was tricky. It's probably been like, donkey's years since I climbed a tree. Anyway, I shuffled along the branch—what are you looking so shocked about?'

'This is not just a tree. This is the bo tree, grown from the bo tree where the Buddha got, er, got, er.'

'Enlightenment.'

'Yes, got enlightenment. You should not climb on it.'

'Whatever. My skills as Catwoman are not being appreciated here. Just listen, can't you? I didn't hurt the tree. I'm a nature lover. I weigh 54 kilos. Anyway, the branches led to the roof section of this bit. The roof here is

sloped, but you can get into a sort of atticky section and then slide along. Since I saw you were in the first room, it wasn't difficult to crawl through the roof space and find you. The last bit of the journey was pretty scary—real Indiana Jones stuff—since most of it was in like, semi-darkness. But then, all the way along, I had this feeling that it was well-organised. You know, someone had taken this route many times, so I knew that there would always be a way forwards and I wouldn't get stuck. I was just worried that someone from one of the other rooms would hear me. Also I lost my earring somewhere. My Buddha hologram thing. Cost ten pounds. I hope I can find it in the morning.'

'I heard you. I thought you were a rat.'

'Yeucch. There are rats here?'

'Yes, the buildings have many rats. Brother Wasuran told me.'

'Jeez, I'm glad I didn't know that when I was up there.'

Silence fell. It wasn't difficult to detect a scampering noise, as what sounded like a whole family of rats stampeded through the roof space above their heads in the direction of the room next to them.

'Better you go now.'

'Aren't you going to thank me for making a great discovery, solving this mystery for you?'

'Thank you. We will tell Master Tran in the morning. Now you go.'

Another rat passed over their heads.

The young woman shivered. 'Eeee. I'm not going back up there if it's full of rats. Besides, it's seriously dark now. All the lights are off and stuff. I'm staying.'

'But where you sleep?'

'I'm an innocent young maiden. I need my beauty sleep. I'm going to sleep in that bed. I think the question is, where are you going to sleep?'



The night was passed in a state of great discomfort. At first, Wong was too furious to sleep. After a couple of hours, he became drowsy and tossed and turned on a blanket on the floor. He was reminded of his teenage years, sleeping on the floorboards of his uncle's spice shop in Guangzhou. As the

night wore on, his hips became increasingly sore and bruised. Joyce, relatively comfortable on top of his bed, had had several beers with Bin, and snored happily. The rats spent the night thundering from one end of the block to the other, apparently having an organised race meet. Wong eventually fell into a troubled sleep, full of strange images from his life.

He re-lived the time he had been fast asleep in the spice shop and had rolled under the rice sack, which had tipped over, hitting him with the force of a boulder, and bursting to bury him in an avalanche of hard white grains.

In his dream, he was a boy and ran to find his uncle. But when he opened the door, instead of a Guangzhou night scene, he found bright daylight. He was at the top of the OUB Centre in Singapore and had climbed out onto a roof ledge, sixty-four storeys above the ground.

Now he saw himself as an adult doing a feng shui reading. Mr Pun, director of East Trade Industries, was shouting at him from a window of a neighbouring building. 'Hurry up, C F, you have to finish before we open to the public in five minutes.'

'Cannot find my *lo pan*,' Wong had replied, balancing precariously on the window ledge and searching frantically in a briefcase. 'My bag full of rats.'

Then he slipped into the building through another window and found himself in Hong Kong, in an office containing a hanging string of coins, right in the malicious death position of the five yellow curses.

There were four doors to the room, but which one to take? He chose the first one, but it was locked. The second one opened onto a deafening rock concert, and the lead screamer on the stage was Joyce McQuinnie.

He slammed the door shut and opened the third door. It contained a large silver statue of a dragon with a red piece of paper in its mouth. It was dripping red liquid from its mouth into a *tien-yuer* benefactor den made of pink pottery. What did it mean?

Again he started looking for his *lo pan*. How could he tell what it meant without knowing what direction it was in? Was it east, in the direction of plum blossom?

Winnie Lim appeared behind him, doing her nails, and she started to laugh. 'Madam Fu on the phone. She want you to come now-lah,' she said. Then Mr Pun entered the room, looking impatiently at his watch. He started

speaking to Winnie. The geomancer could not hear what they were talking about.

‘No. I can do it. I can do it,’ Wong had said.

The talking grew louder and louder.

He woke up. Blinking at the pale dawn light, he wondered where he was. He didn’t recognise the room. He didn’t know why he was on the ground, or why there was a bed next to him. Had he rolled off? Why were there a dozen faces at the open door? Was this part of his dream?

When he saw the men’s grey robes, his memory returned. His head fell back onto the rolled-up garment he had been using as a pillow. Oh no. He was in the temple. It must be five o’clock in the morning. Time to get up. But why were the brothers looking shocked? He suddenly recalled the presence of his assistant, and raised himself on his elbows. There she was, fast asleep, her dishevelled dress indecently revealing her knees.

‘No, no,’ he said to the men. ‘I can explain you. Truly.’



Master Tran arrived back at the vihara at seven, by which time Wong and McQuinnie had fled to Porntip’s house for a shower and breakfast.

The geomancer, stunned into silence by the humiliating events of the morning, sipped his green tea and cast sidelong glances at his assistant. They were having breakfast on the verandah. He was too angry to speak to her, and thought with pleasure that her term in his office was coming to an end. They would arrive back in Singapore today, a Wednesday, and she would be dismissed from C F Wong & Associates. After that, he would probably never see her again.

Joyce was having a conversation on a mobile phone with a friend. As he listened to her, he mused that the intriguing puzzle of her brand of English was probably the only thing he would miss about her. When she was talking to people of her own age and culture, her language was completely different from the English in his textbooks—probably just what he needed to learn to write good popular books in that language, he thought. Well, *mo baan faat*. Never mind. Good riddance. He would be quite happy if he never met another Westerner for the rest of his life.

His eyes still narrow with fury, he glanced up at her and tuned in to her conversation, to see just how much of her language he had picked up in the past ten weeks.

‘Synth. In The Exploding Blowfish. Grunge. Grunge meets techno-jungle with a bit of rap really. Anyway, so we’re at Lippy’s, and he’s like, “Yeah?” And I’m like, “Yeah.” And he’s like, “Getoutahere.” And I’m like, “Whatever.”’

No, he decided. Individual words could be understood, but put them together and they formed an incomprehensible code. Probably rubbish anyway.

Bin stepped into the scene, and cast his lovesick gaze upon his exotic foreign princess. She waved a greeting but did not consider his arrival worth interrupting her phone conversation for. She’d done her shopping.

The geomancer realised there was something new in the young man’s expression. It was no longer the face of a starry-eyed suitor, but the pained look of a wounded-but-still-loyal lover. Clearly the news of Wong’s apparent indiscretion had reached him. The teenage boy’s lips tightened as looked over at the Chinese man—his evil usurper.

‘Miss Joyce, I am ready to take you to the temple and afterwards to the airport,’ said Bin, and then nodded contemptuously at Wong. ‘And him.’

Porntip then summoned the geomancer to the phone. ‘For you. I think it is your boss.’

Wong hurried inside and stood to attention as he took the phone. But it was Winnie Lim, calling from his office in Wai Wai Mansions, Telok Ayer Street.

‘CF? Is Winnie. Mr Pun on phone this morning. He says he is very happy with you. His frien’ give him plenty big contrack-lah. Scratch his back for him. But you scratch his frien’s back, see? So all work out nicely.’

‘Do not understand. Say again please.’

‘Mr Pun. His frien’. Joyce’s daddy. Gave him a big contrack. Joyce’s daddy gave Mr Pun a big contrack. Mr Queeny very happy because you help his daughter with her school projeck. So now Mr Pun is very happy. He wan’ you to go to America.’

‘What? Me go to—? What for?’

‘Mr Pun got plenty work for you in America. Big property deal with Joyce’s daddy.’

‘I don’t like to go to America.’

‘You never been.’

‘I saw movies. Always police cars exploding in America. Very dangerous.’

‘Big money. Mr Pun is in very good mood. I think you call him now-lah, okay or not? You get good deal, I think.’

‘How big?’

‘You call him.’

‘When I get back. Afternoon.’



At 7.40 a.m., Joyce was sitting on the verandah of Porntip’s house examining and re-examining her purchases of the previous day. She had bought six CDs and eight VCDs. She knew they were pirate copies, but they were being sold at prices she couldn’t resist. She eased her nagging conscience by telling herself that she would play them a few times, see which ones she really liked, and then buy legitimate copies of the best ones.

Some combination of factors—a slight breeze, a distant bird-call, the sound of a car door closing—made her look up. The sight before her over the balcony railings was beautiful: a vista of palm trees, gently swaying as if doing a Mexican wave. The sky had not quite lost its morning pinkness, and there were a thousand tiny, rippled clouds, high in the vault of Heaven: a mackerel sky, her mother would have called it. There was the whining noise of a bus moving up a hill. A dog barked, its voice given a curious resonance by the rising wind. Then she heard a sound behind her.

Porntip’s servant woman brought her a vivid yellow drink. The old maid, whose face seemed to have melted on one side, spoke no English, so Joyce had no idea what it was. She nodded her thanks, and gingerly lifted it to her lips. The woman stayed to watch, so Joyce took a sip. It was oddly sweet yet it tasted thick and savoury at the same time. She smacked her lips, trying to separate the tastes. There was pineapple juice in it, she thought, and salt. A lot of salt. She decided it was disgusting—and then swallowed the rest of the contents of the tumbler. Disgusting in a rather nice way, she

thought. The woman almost immediately disappeared into the shadows and re-emerged seconds later to refill it from a none-too-clean-looking jug.

Joyce thanked her with a smile and a nod. She looked at the salty-sweet drink and half-consciously began to realise how much she had changed in the past few weeks. She had eaten and drunk all sorts of strange things. And spent time with so many odd people. And helped crack criminal cases! And seen corpses. And been to Malaysia and Hong Kong, and India and Vietnam. And discovered a secret passageway in a Buddhist monastery.

And learned a bit of feng shui. She knew that a sheer cliff near a lake or the sea in the west was a 'mountain star falling into water'. She knew that a semi-circle of mountains was an embracing road, a dragon's lair. She knew that the Chien Kua was one of the Four West Houses. She knew that the numbers part of feng shui was based on the markings on a turtle's shell seen several thousand years ago. She knew that soil ch'i damages water ch'i, and you need to place metal ch'i between them. She knew that soil-metal-water was the support cycle of the Later Heaven. She knew that things had their rightful places. She knew that it was important to arrange even the smallest things properly, because only then could larger objects find their correct space. She knew that things had unseen effects on other things. She knew that only when everything was in its right place did lasting harmony flow into a community.

One of the VCDs slipped from her hand, but she didn't pick it up. She lifted the salty-sweet liquid to her lips, and took another sip. It was still disgusting.



By nine, the sun was high. Wong was sitting in Master Tran's office. The chief monk was an old but sprightly man. His head was not fuzzy and shaven like those of his colleagues, but had the smooth hairlessness of advanced age. His skin was sun-browned and he had thick knuckles, like walnuts, on each gnarled hand.

Wong went through the details of his feng shui redesign in as much detail as time would allow. The head of the temple listened politely, and looked at the notes he had been handed. He then asked several questions, which were



intelligent enough to show the geomancer that he took the business seriously.

Then Master Tran put the papers to one side. ‘*Merci bien*. You have done well, and I have much to thank you for. Can I not persuade you to stay for lunch?’

‘I cannot. We have plane to catch.’ Wong looked down at his feet. ‘Master Tran, there is one more thing I have to tell you. There was a little problem this morning.’

‘I understand,’ said the old man. ‘You were caught in *flagrante*.’

‘No. I was in the sleeping room with my assistant. She is not a man.’

‘That’s what I meant.’

‘Oh. Yes. But let me explain. We discovered a route for smuggling things into the Vihara. A sort of opening in the wall. A tunnel in the roof space. I have marked the route on this map. You can see it. Decide what to do with it.’ The geomancer pulled another diagram from his file and placed it on the table. ‘You can block it. You will stop people bringing wrong things in. Also there is an escape of ch’i energy there. It acts as door in the northeast. Not good here. The ch’i of the northeast is cold. Cutting ch’i. Behaves in unpredictable way.’

‘CF, everything is unpredictable. If there is one thing I have learned in my life, that is it.’

Wong looked the old priest in the eye. ‘I must explain you something about last night. The reason girl was in my room. She was testing the route. This route which we discovered. She could not go back. It was too dark. She does not like rats. You have many rats. There was no other reason for her stay in my room. I slept on floor. I have witnesses.’

‘You certainly do have witnesses. You do not need to tell me all this. A monastery is the one place where gossip travels even faster than among shop women in a marketplace. None of this matters.’ The old man smiled.

‘But secret tunnel. This is an important discovery, no?’

‘To be honest, C F, no. We have known about that for years. I have sent junior brothers in and out through the hole myself if I needed some urgent supplies of something or other. I got someone to bring me a superb bottle of Taylor’s 1975 last year. For my health, of course. Would you like a drop now . . . ? No, okay.’

Wong needed a few seconds to ingest this information. ‘You knew about secret tunnel? Brother Wasuran said someone bring cigarettes and video machine in. And monks wanting to leave. These were problems, yes?’

‘Ye-es,’ said Master Tran slowly. He clasped his hands over his stomach. ‘This is true. But you have to understand how life works here. It is on a different scale to life in your busy-busy Singapore. Everything happens a bit more slowly. Yes, there was a case of cigarettes discovered, let me see, that was in 1988. And the video machine? That was discovered about five or six years ago, in the mid-90s. It was not really a big problem. You see, we have no television and no electricity, and I understand a video player needs both these things to work. These little incidents stick in the brothers’ heads because they are rare. We live a quiet life.’

‘So smuggling items not a big problem. But it is a feng shui problem. Changes flow of ch’i.’

‘I’m sure it does, and for that reason, it was good that you discovered that route and incorporated it into your report.’

‘Why you invite me here? What was the problem you want fixed?’

‘There was one particular problem, but it was a more general one. And it is one that you have already solved. Thank you.’

‘Gift of feng shui is given me by Heaven. Am happy to share with you.’

Master Tran moved over to a sideboard and took out a bottle of port. ‘Don’t mind if I have one, do you? C F, you have helped in ways that perhaps even you do not realise. For example, the fact that you were accompanied by your attractive girlfriend—’

‘Assistant.’

‘I’m sorry, your assistant, has had a very interesting effect on the men. And not a negative one. She is an interesting person, Brother Wasuran tells me. He had a chat with her before you went off to Porntip’s house for breakfast. It is always interesting to see something from another person’s point of view, particularly if that person is very different from oneself. It broadens the horizons. This is particularly important in something as closed as this monastery, where we don’t go out and mix much.’

‘My temporary assistant,’ added Wong. Tran’s words reminded him of his journal, part 73, his philosophy about the size of a person’s world. Only when you meet someone who doesn’t fit into your world is there an opportunity to make your world bigger. He had to admit, his dreadful

assistant's different point of view had proved slightly useful in a few cases. There had been many difficult times, but her impact had not been entirely negative in certain cases, he had to admit. Last night was a typical example. She had got him into the most awful trouble, yet at the same time, she solved one of the feng shui problems of the Vihara by discovering the secret passage. His reading would have been disastrously incomplete if she had not found the unofficial northeastern opening to the enclosure.

Master Tran returned to the table. 'Your feng shui readings are greatly appreciated. We will attempt to implement as many of your suggestions as we can. I am quite sure they will have a beneficial effect on the temple. But let me tell you how your visit has really helped us.'

The old man looked out of the window of the dark room at the men, who were travelling across the yard to gather at the bo tree for a ritual.

'This is a Zen Buddhist temple. Our work deals with the inner peace of the soul as well as the outer peace of the body. I have become aware over the past year or so that there has been some loss of faith here, some general disillusionment. Some of the brothers were getting curious about life outside, about the modern world, about women. This is natural. Naturally they were intrigued by your visit with a young woman.'

Tran turned from the window and sat down again. 'When they saw you this morning after you had spent one night with a Western woman, they were shocked. You looked very tired. "Close to death," Brother Wasuran said. They saw how much energy had been drawn out of you, and were left with an extremely negative impression of the delights of a free life, of life with members of the opposite sex, in the world outside.'

'I did not sleep much last night.'

'This is what they assumed.'

'No. I mean I did not sleep much last night because I was uncomfortable on the floor. Not because . . . Not because of anything else.'

'It does not matter what the truth is. What matters is the effect of the truth. This is a Zen principle. If a non-truth has the effect of the truth, then maybe it has made its own truth. This is possible. Whatever happened, the result was that the brothers were shocked at the draining effect of what they saw as your sinful behaviour. They did not want to be like you and lose their life energy, and die young.'

‘I had no sleep last night, and I am an old man. I was born fifty-six years ago.’

‘Interesting. Be that as it may. To be frank, I told the brothers this morning that you were twenty-seven.’

‘I see.’ Wong nodded. Truly, the way of Zen was mysterious and impossible to fathom.

He put his papers in his bag. The geomancer was happy to feel they had helped the old man, although he was still unclear about precisely how they had done it. Never mind. The problem was solved, that was the main thing. Tomorrow would be a new day and a new challenge. He suddenly frowned. Unless they sent him to America, which would certainly be the end of life as he knew it. He decided then and there that he would simply refuse to go. Let Mr Pun take away his retainer, if he wanted. He glanced through the old man’s window and noticed the activity in the grounds.

‘What the brothers are doing?’ the geomancer asked.

‘They are all in front of the bo tree. We had a little miracle last night.’

‘A miracle.’

‘The oldest brother was praying at the eastern altar last night and a small but perfect image of the Buddha fell into his hands from the sky. It is small, but it is really quite a marvellous thing. Like a tiny picture, but also like a little round door to Nirvana. You can look deep into it and see the Buddha inside. The brothers are worshipping it.’

‘Understand.’

The honk of a car horn outside reminded him that Joyce and Bin were waiting in Porntip’s Nissan at the front door, ready to go to the airport. The sun had risen to the height of the temple walls and was beginning to shine into the office, its light dappled by the leaves of the bo tree.

NURY VITTACHI did not win the Nobel for his first novel, was not shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize with his subsequent books, and has never been nominated for a Nobel Prize for Literature. 'I hope to make it a clean sweep by not winning the Pulitzer next year,' the Hong Kong-based novelist said.

A FENG SHUI DETECTIVE NOVEL



# THE FENG SHUI DETECTIVE



